A COMMON CHEAT

BY

SOPHIA CLEUGH

MATILDA, GOVERNESS OF THE ENGLISH

ERNESTINE SOPHIE

JEANNE MARGOT

A COMMON CHEAT

A COMMON CHEAT

BY

SOPHIA CLEUGH

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1928

All rights reserved

COPYRIGHT, 1928,
BY THE MACMILLAN COMPANY.

Set up and electrotyped.
Published September, 1928.

SET UP BY BROWN BROTHERS LINOTYPERS
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE CORNWALL PRESS

TO

CLARICE, WITH LOVE

RIDING BY MOONLIGHT

From the tall hill top some great star
Falls to the west afar; and afar
Out of the glistening gorge below
The orient moon swims full and slow
Hair dishevelled and sleeves blown wide
Into the kind, cool night I ride
Faint winds free strange scents anew,
Moon-paled maples bright with dew
Dripping dreams from bough to bough
Sigh to my lute, "Why sleepest thou?"
Hands on the waiting strings fall mute,
Low my heart answers—"I am the lute."

—By an unknown Chinese poet of the Sung Period (960-1206 A.D.), Translated by L. Cranmer Byng.

A COMMON CHEAT

A COMMON CHEAT

CHAPTER 1

THE dozen music rooms which Methpeden House boasted were all tenanted, the hour being three in the afternoon and "practice" and "prep" in full swing both in the upper and lower school. And each inexpensive tin can of a piano was, under the iron touch of conscientious and hockey playing young fingers and feet, stoutly emitting sounds of violent, metallic intensity.

Struck painfully by the harshly discordant sounds continually rising on the summer breeze Miss Charlotte Manisty, the official teacher of the piano at Miss Trout's seaside school for the daughters of well-to-do tradesmen and minor professional men, after standing outside in the long, narrow, skylighted passage listening for some time with an ever mounting horror to the jarring discord within, at last stuffed her fingers in her pretty ears and fled.

"Why do we have to teach them to thump the keyboard at all?" she demanded desperately of the unresponsive terra cotta washed walls about her. "When all they can make—and twelve of our best pupils too—is that fiendish racket. Not one atom of melody sings in one of their silly, ordinary noddles. What is the use of my continuing to pass my days teaching these children to bang out elementary classics on the piano? When once they leave school they'll certainly never look at a piece of music again. And a good thing, too. I wonder I've had the patience to put up with such a dreadful life as this for so long. But this has settled it."

Dreadful or not, and long or short, Miss Manisty had so far managed to endure the irksome discipline of a scho-

lastic career for exactly eight months. The period then being the middle of the summer term and the month that of June. Moreover, to be exact, she had suffered this depressingly monotonous existence ever since her father—a hard working lawyer of the second class, and a stuff gownsman—had died incontinently, in the Assize Courts at Guildford upon one hot July afternoon in the previous year, of overwork and underfeeding. Thereby throwing more or less upon the tender mercies of an indifferent world his bustling but ineffectual wife and no less than three well grown and unusually handsome children all under the age of eighteen.

Returned from the quiet funeral, and sitting in the darkened drawing-room overlooking her flower garden—the one real passion of her life—Mrs. Manisty had, in the company of her children, learned the harsh news, so usual in English middle-class families, on the death of a breadwinner, that henceforward an iron, cramping poverty must encompass the rest of her days.

Not overmuch surprised, or for that matter dismayed, she still continued to let her glance pass from one alert young face, about the table at which they were sitting, to the other.

"So poor Charles has left us all upon the rock-pile. Well, well—I never imagined him to be a Crœsus. But I wish he had let me know a little more about his money matters during his lifetime."

Her eyes on her son she mused idly:

"Paul looks as if he needed a tonic. That black suit is terribly unbecoming. Makes him look so sallow, poor child. And children grow so fast before they actually get into their teens. Or a change might do him good——"

Then she remembered there would be no money for a change—never would be again, probably.

"After all it's lucky we came to live in the country."

It was at this point she sighed so deeply that genial Mr. Kingsbury, the family solicitor and now the children's legal

guardian, sympathetically imagined Mrs. Manisty to be thinking sadly of her departed Charles laid in his grave only an hour previously. But the widow's thoughts were of the present moment entirely as her considering glance roved to the intently frowning face of her eldest child.

"At least Charlotte is strong as a horse. But I could wish she were not so good looking, now. Looks will only be a detriment to her. I suppose she'll have to be some sort of a teacher. She never possessed any outstanding talent. It's a thousand pities her hair is so yellow and so thick. The color of ripe corn as her father was so fond of saying. Now it can only draw attention to her."

More decidedly worried about the provocative beauty of her first-born than the situation in which she found herself Clara Manisty turned her eyes towards her youngest child.

"Nettie's plain enough," she reflected with a sombre satisfaction, "and dark like her poor father. There was a foolish man working himself to death for nothing. Never could enjoy anything. Always worrying about the future and old age. He certainly need not have bothered."

Through all the reading of the simple will and the subsequent harangue on ways and means by Mr. Kingsbury her volatile thoughts continued to wander aimlessly.

"Really, what was the good of a will at all? Needless expense, I should call it. The poor soul left nothing. He never made enough to leave a penny. Ah, yes, there is the insurance—luckily."

And when at last the bereaved family had been left alone with the knowledge that the little house built on the edge of the St. George's Hills was their own, and that from the careful investment of the life insurance of the late Charles Perkins Manisty a yearly income totalling some five hundred and fifty pounds might be assuredly expected to materialize, it was also fairly obvious to them all that Charlotte would have to go out to work with the least possible delay.

"You would not wish to be a burden on me, I know,"

pointed out her mother. "I shall have as much as I can do with trying to educate Paul and Nettie. And everything left in trust, too. I do think your father might have given me a freer hand. Here I am—rooted till I die, I suppose. And I shan't be forty till December."

His mother's placidly plaintive tone only made Paul laugh.

A silent child in her presence, with bright, glancing eyes, he somehow managed to convey an impression of intractable brilliancy.

"But I am going to be an explorer," he said clearly.

Mrs. Manisty turned shortsighted blue eyes on him.

"I'm sure I don't know what you'll explore, then," she retorted briskly, "unless it's your lesson books for another two years. And then you'll go into old Kingsbury's office. And Lord knows I shall have to scrape and pinch to pay the premium——"

"Oh, no, I shan't," said Paul.

"And I have quite decided to be an opera singer," suddenly boomed Nettie from her corner by the open window in a deep contralto voice of an amazing depth.

Mrs. Manisty professed herself extremely shocked.

"With your father not cold in his grave—I'm astonished at you, Nettie. You will also go on with your lessons, missy, and when you grow up——"

"You'll marry the curate," remarked Charlotte slowly and distinctly.

Nettie contemplated her elder sister for a space in her expensive mourning.

"I bet you won't marry anything so respectable," she gibed at last. "Your hair's dead against it."

"Nettie!" cried her mother, "I'm shocked—horrified. If your father could only hear you."

Nettie sighed loudly.

"But he can't, the poor, dumb dear. Mother, I do hope he gets a good rest up there."

She hunched her shoulders vaguely in the direction of

the evening sky overspread at that instant with rosy cloudlets.

"There's a touch of green in the sunset," she muttered in a lower tone and half to herself, "so he'll probably find things not quite right up there too. Storms and tempests—and scoldings and naggings from Saint Peter, I suppose. I expect Heaven is by no means what it's cracked up to be."

"What on earth are you muttering to yourself?" asked her brother, unobtrusively coming over to her, while Mrs. Manisty discussed languidly with her elder daughter the possibility of her being able to take up teaching the art of playing the piano as a means of livelihood.

Nettie patted the cushioned window-seat invitingly.

"I'm not really muttering anything," she returned. "I was thinking out loud. Tell me, Paul, how does one become an opera singer?"

"Well, you change your name for one thing," he returned promptly. "But do you think you could pull that career off? You know what father and his friends all thought about it."

"Yes."

"Of course I'm not prejudiced myself."

"That's a good thing," said Nettie heartily. "For I always believe one person should be in sympathy with what I do. I do so hate not being able to talk it over comfortably with one creature. The rest of the world I don't give a damn for."

"Hush," said Paul. "If mother hears you she'll have hysterics. She's always so afraid of that word. It's like an explosion to her."

Nettie shrugged her shoulders.

"She hasn't good nerves," she said. "But 'blast' upsets her much more. I've seen her cry when father used it."

At this moment the maid entering to announce in her soft Irish voice that dinner was on the table brought to the notice of them all the workaday fact that grief, and the funeral ceremonies, had rendered them remarkably hungry.

Facing the boiled chicken Mrs. Manisty sighed deeply.

"Your poor father, I keep forgetting he is not here to enjoy the chicken. Well, children, I suppose we had better eat a bit. I wish Mary did not show such a tendency to burn the onion sauce always."

Paul leaned towards his younger sister to whisper gleefully:

"Did you notice—we got in without washing our hands, too."

"I notice a lot," she said.

Nettie turned on him a ruminative eye.

But all this was a year ago now and Miss Charlotte Manisty had been the official music mistress at Methpeden House for three dull, hard-working, dreary terms.

A creature of erratic energy but a sustained and easy-going good humor Charlotte, although liking little the discipline of Miss Trout's establishment, and less the brand of music she must impart within its red-brick, ivy-covered, castellated walls, had yet managed to amuse herself at times fairly well and make at least one lasting friendship.

And now as she retreated to her own small music room on the floor below she decided to consult Thérèse de la Motte as soon as might be, for stand the situation much longer she could not.

Rebelliously scales and arpeggi rang out under her fingers for the next half hour and when the warning bell for tea clanged out in the hall Charlotte's resolution was fixed.

However it was not till much later that evening that she was able to secure the sympathetic attention of the French teacher.

"That you are stifled here I have seen for some time, chérie," said Mademoiselle de la Motte after Charlotte had unfolded her tale of distress.

"But what am I to do about it?"

Thérèse de la Motte regarded Charlotte thoughtfully for some seconds.

"How would you like to travel?" she asked.

The suggestion—a completely unconsidered one up to that moment—pleased Charlotte uncommonly. For, if it performed no other function, at least it endowed her from that instant with material for continued thought of a romantically pleasing nature.

"Oh, to be doing something different," she sighed. "Yes, I should like it very much, I expect, Thérèse."

And stimulating recollections of utopianly attractive scenes in certain novels she had lately enjoyed—wherein the several heroines, in elegant dress, sat at round tables upon the terraces of world famous Riviera hotels, escorted by at least a half-dozen of immaculately turned out, handsome, and wealthy admirers while eating and drinking and flirting without any regard for time, place or money—instantly occurred to her.

Charlotte began to smile lazily to herself.

That kind of travel appeared to her rosily ideal.

None of your cheap, tourist effects about that sort of voyaging over the world.

She was giving rein indeed to a very sanguine fancy when Thérèse de la Motte spoke again.

"Travel broadens the mind."

This extremely trite saying brought Charlotte's kite to earth in a hurry.

"I dare say," she returned indifferently, abandoning those visions of travel which, whatever else they may have been, were certainly designed to empty the purse.

"Yes, and gives one an understanding of life in other countries too. People forget, too often, that each nation has its own preferences and traditions. What would your mother feel about it?"

"Mother?" repeated Charlotte. "I don't believe she'd care one way or the other. As long as it did not cost her anything."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She flushed up under the surprised stare of Mademoiselle de la Motte.

"Mother isn't particularly fond of any of us," she added hurriedly. "She looks on her children as unmitigated nuisances mostly."

"Should you say that to me?"

Charlotte glanced at the French mistress doubtfully. Such delicacy of feeling was entirely foreign to her and to her family.

"Why not?" she demanded.

"There is a certain reticence—even in friendship."

But Charlotte shook her head.

She was of a day and generation that flaunted a brutal sincerity—or what passed with it for such.

"Everyone that knows us can see it plainly. Mother makes no effort to hide her boredom with us all. I can assure you, Thérèse, I was giving away no family secret then. People can't help their likes or dislikes. Probably Mother would have been fond of us if she had not had to slave so to bring us up. We were always poor, I suppose. And she hated poverty—like I do. Then she feels the patronage of richer people terribly. When half the time they mean nothing. But as far as my going abroad goes," she ended, returning to the original subject abruptly, "I can't see any reason why my surviving parent should have the slightest objection."

After a moment of thought she added:

"It would depend, of course, upon how I went."

"But—naturally."

And Thérèse de la Motte got up from her basket chair by the open window, which to Charlotte's secret irritation creaked so regularly with each movement of her stouter and more elderly figure, and crossing deliberately the linoleum covered floor went up to that row of tall, narrow, tin lockers, painted a battleship gray, which disfigured one wall of the teachers' recreation room. Taking a key out of a brocade bag which hung from the handle of one marked with her name she opened its door, withdrawing from the

pocket of her garden-coat an envelope. With this she returned to the indolently relaxed Charlotte who had meanwhile been watching the clouds drift in the sky and also allowing her reflections once more to wander far.

"I should like to marry an Arab, sometimes I think," she murmured. "It must be such a free, wild life."

"Not for the women," returned the French teacher firmly and she sat down again.

"What is freedom?" demanded Charlotte idly.

Thérèse de la Motte laughed.

"What a question!" she returned. "There isn't such a thing in the world. God knows why men have not recognized so simple a fact ages ago."

Then she took out from the thin, foreign envelope a much crossed missive.

"That," she remarked, tapping the latter, "is the only deceptive tendency in Madame's character. She is old-fashioned enough to cross her epistolary communications. I will say however for her she does not care about writing—preferring to telegraph whenever possible."

"Really," said Charlotte politely, having not the slightest idea to what, or whom, her friend was now referring.

"Perhaps," suggested Thérèse de la Motte noticing her blank look, "I had better begin at the beginning. But this will have to do with your travelling probably."

She spread the latter out on her lap.

"This," she continued cheerfully, "is a letter from the relative of an old pupil of mine—who is in need of a young *dame de compagnie.*"

"Oh," said Charlotte.

"Now it appears that Madame de Dasulas intends to travel this autumn. Luckily for you, ma chère, should she engage your services. She is very wealthy and generous—the two qualities do not so often run in harness—and never dreams of moving without a complete ménage. A maid, a chauffeur, her own cook Adolphe; an artist but of a tem-

perament, believe me. And Monsieur le Normand, her courier. He has seen to her journeys for more years than he cares now to count."

The description of this elderly household did not arouse any very great enthusiasm in Charlotte.

"Are they all old, then?" she asked disappointedly.

"Round about my age, I suppose, most of them," returned Thérèse. "Not old—but no longer very young, shall we say? But does that make one so very uninteresting? After all there are more middle-aged people in the world than very young ones, and the burden of life is certainly on their shoulders."

"But you're not old," said Charlotte hastily, for once, for some reason she could not fathom, feeling a trifle ashamed of herself.

Thérèse de la Motte continued placidly.

"Youth is very charming of course, but very unformed. A colt is delightful to watch racing about a field for a time but boring as a, how do you call it, steady diet. Half-baked brains do not go far with educated people."

Charlotte moved restlessly in her chair.

"I suppose that is why I hate teaching," she said slowly. "My pupils are so ignorant and so self-sufficient. They think they can learn everything in twelve lessons."

Thérèse shot a sharp glance at Charlotte and then she laughed

"I have been teaching for twenty years," she returned, "and there is not much about this profession I do not know. But you can believe me, my dear, when I say that education is lost on most young people. They are far too occupied with dreams of love or conquest, or, again, imagining that they can run the world on entirely new principles, to study seriously. Besides the young love dramatics. And usually waste the best years of their life."

These criticisms touched Charlotte too nearly, whether the French mistress meant them to or no, to be altogether palatable.

Charlotte hastened to side-step the topic as far as she dared.

"I have not been at it long," she said deliberately ignoring Thérèse's reflections on youthful impatience and want of application, "but I can see already it is dust and ashes—trying to teach anyone anything. But I suppose even if I travel as someone's companion I can expect no fun."

Her tone was so mournful that again the French mistress could not help laughing amusedly.

"Ah, well, there is always the personal equation," she pointed out. "And—you may have been born under a romantic star, Charlotte."

"No such luck."

"And everything you do may turn out interesting——"

"I had rather it was amusing."

"And successful."

"Ah, well——" said Charlotte, and she listened to Mademoiselle de la Motte's subsequent careful explanations of the situation now open for a young person obliged to earn her living, who yet possessed no particular talents, with an attention which barely concealed a complete lack of interest. However, in the end, it was agreed between them that the French teacher should write to Madame de Dasulas suggesting Charlotte for the vacant post.

Some weeks passed uneventfully by and then to the Frenchwoman's great disappointment when the answer arrived it appeared that wealthy Gallic ladies possessed annoyingly changeable minds. For now Madame de Dasulas had decided to take with her on her travels one of her nieces.

"I knew it was too good to be true," said Charlotte, and the term being near its latter end finished it in a maze of examinations and a mood of noticeably deep gloom.

Returning to her mother's house very discontentedly for the summer holidays she at once made her younger sister the recipient of her misgivings as to her future in the career imposed on her by an unkind destiny.

"I am afraid there is no chance of anything but some local pomposity for me," she sighed to Nettie, sitting on her bed in the room they shared, while her younger sister energetically unpacked for her. "For teach forever I will not. But as I never see a man worth looking at, how shall I ever get married?"

"What you'll have to go for—is a rich man," said Nettie, sitting back on her haunches before the battered cabin trunk, she was denuding of its contents. "And most men are old before they are rich," she added sapiently.

"But where will I get him—old or young? Tell me that, child."

Nettie shrugged thin shoulders under her battered woolen jersey.

"Things are very badly arranged in this country—for women," she said. "What good is all this love business? They should bring us up to make sensible marriages. Look at poor Father without a bean marrying Mother because he fell in love with her."

Charlotte nodded and, leaning over the brass rail of the small bed, fished up her cigarette case from a welter of trifling articles piled up on the table at its foot.

"Did he have one day's peace or happiness?" demanded Nettie. "No. He was always slaving—never any money for anything. Talking forever about saving this and that. And worn out by forty-five."

"That's true," said Charlotte, lighting a match.

"His mind always on tiny, stupid things. Like a mat wearing out in the bath room. Or Paul breaking a breakfast plate. Sometimes when I listened to those endless, silly discussions I used to feel like throwing a shilling on the table and saying loudly—'Oh, damn the expense'. Only I never had the shilling. And you know very well not one of our breakfast plates ever cost more than sixpence."

Charlotte blew a smoke ring out into the afternoon air.

"My dear child, you are much too outspoken."

Nettie took out her sister's one evening frock and shook it gently.

"You ought to have lots of pretty clothes, too."

This was a chord which struck a deep sigh from Charlotte.

"I know it," she said, "with my figure, though I do say it who should not, it's a sin and shame. But I'm only an unqualified young woman who cannot expect even a decent educational post—while as for clothes——"

She threw up her hands and, smoking furiously, began to walk stormily up and down the room.

"I wish you'd been me and I'd been you," she cried, rounding suddenly upon Nettie, who with arms at the moment full of sensible underclothing was marching towards the one, painted chest of drawers which they shared.

"Why?" asked Nettie.

"Because you're so much more practical than I am."

Nettie opened a drawer.

"In ten years I shall be famous—and making heaps of money," she announced. "But that will be very little use to you, I am afraid."

Charlotte sank upon the bed once more.

"Well, of all the conceited young brats!"

Nettie, laying away substantial underwear in the weather-beaten piece of furniture, permitted herself to giggle childishly.

"No, I'm not conceited," she returned. "I just know—that's all. As it happens I'm going to have one of the great contralto voices of the world. I heard Doctor Burchell tell Mother so the other day. But he says I must have my tonsils out first. That upset Mother."

Again Nettie giggled.

"She told him she could not possibly plunge her little daughter into so much suffering. That's a lie you know. It's the bill she's thinking of. And I've got to get properly trained too. Then, Doctor Burchell said, I could be a prop to her old age."

"I can see you," said Charlotte.

Nettie laughed again very heartily.

"Not likely," she said firmly. "Mother can get some other prop; Paul, perhaps. But I'm not going to understudy poor old Dad. I'm going to enjoy myself."

"Henrietta!" said Charlotte. "You shock me terribly."

"Probably I shall have lovers too," went on Nettie calmly, continuing to arrange under-garments in neat piles, "and then where would Mother be?"

Charlotte professed herself horrified by such outspokenness on the part of her younger sister.

"Good God!" she cried. "Have you no morals?"

"As to that I don't know yet," returned her sister composedly and, shutting the drawer, started to sing the Lost Chord at the top of her voice.

For some seconds Charlotte listened to her efforts in a coldly critical silence.

"At least you have a voice like a barrel," she said at last.

"I believe I could fill the Albert Hall—easily," returned Nettie in a satisfied tone. "There—everything is unpacked now. Help me into the box-room with this dreadful old trunk."

2.

This summer Charlotte found the local society even worse than she expected. It was dull to the point of annihilation. Before her father's death she had been too young to bother herself with more than her own immediate girls' circle of friends but now it seemed that Mrs. Manisty expected her to make some effort to be civil to the older folk living about them. An expectation which caused endless acrimonious discussions between Charlotte and her mother; who could see no kind of use in wasting time over people who did not interest her. For she found her parent's few intimates dreadfully old-fashioned and out of date.

And did not scruple to say so. Besides endless afternoons spent in playing sedate games of auction bridge bored her to distraction. Nor did the tennis club and its chattering habitués amuse her much more. The gossip of the neighborhood had never thrilled her; centering as it did mainly round the doings of the wife of the bank manager who was flighty and dressed outrageously, according to her neighbors and friends. But small town scandal did not amuse Charlotte. And thrown on herself as she was for companionship—for Nettie was too young in years, though certainly old enough in brain, to accompany her to those informal summer dances and boating parties which mildly abounded in their vicinity during the summer months—Charlotte grew daily more visibly discontented.

Paul, back from a local grammar school, was at an utterly useless age, so far as she was concerned, apart from the fact that he spent most of his leisure time in ditches.

"Training to be an explorer," explained Nettie to her incredulous sister. "He knows a lot about flora and fauna already."

Charlotte raised her eyebrows.

"About what?" she asked.

"Insects and snakes and things," further explained her younger sister. "The other day when we were out together he made me carry a snake for him."

"Ugh!" shivered Charlotte. "For goodness sake don't be creepy, Henrietta."

"The snake was warm," continued Nettie, taking no notice of her sister's disgusted tone, "quite warm. I thought they were all cold and slimy."

At the moment they were both walking up the village street on their way to the Rectory where they were to take tea, and, incidentally, retrieve Mrs. Manisty whose afternoon it was to sew shirts for the heathen in the Rector's drawing-room under the capable direction of Mrs. Adams. A weekly task which wearied her extremely.

Conversation dying upon the subject of Reptilla the two Manisty girls proceeded through the Rectory garden and up to the front door of the red brick and ample house in silence.

As Nettie reached up to tug at the long iron bell-pull almost hidden in the ivy creeper she exclaimed suddenly:

"Oh, I forgot——"

Charlotte stared at her.

"Forgot what?" she demanded, for Nettie's almost photographic memory was a by-word in her family. "I don't believe you ever forget anything."

"Oh, yes I did. I forgot that he might be here."

"He—who?"

"That person who had a smash-up at the cross roads just before you came home."

Charlotte looked at her sister with a very provoked expression upon her flower-like face.

"If there is one thing I do hate more than another it is when you get mysterious, Nettie," she observed sternly. "Fancy waiting till we are actually on the very doorstep to tell me there is a real man at the Rectory at last. It's enough to make a body faint away in the hall from sheer astonishment."

Nettie pealed the bell.

"And he's young, too," she said.

"Young!" repeated Charlotte faintly.

"Yes—and, if you like them foreign and dark and all that, good looking they say in a kind of a hard, hawk-like way."

Charlotte poked her sister viciously in the back with the handle of her tennis racket.

"You deceitful little pig," she cried, "to keep all this to yourself for a whole week. If I'd known there was a young man here I'd have called on Mrs. Adams with Mother last Tuesday. I suppose that's why you were so unusually docile and wore your best tussore dress and

made such a fuss about your hat. Personally I think a brown ostrich feather makes you look sallow."

"Who cares?" retorted Nettie. "I'm out of black anyway. That made me look as yellow as a kite's claw, if you like. Besides he wouldn't notice me—I'm much too young for him."

But the hall door opening at this moment Charlotte had to follow the Rector's grim faced maid into the drawing-room and the entrenched sewing circle.

Greeted civilly by Mrs. Adams and more effusively, for once, by her mother, she sank on to the nearest seat and began to make polite conversation.

But there was no sign of any male—young or old—within the Rectory drawing-room walls, or amongst its violet flowered, cretonne covered furniture.

Nettie roaming about the sewing circle, however, took the first opportunity of rather violently opening a discussion upon the Rector's invalid guest.

"Why doesn't he come downstairs when you're all sewing?" she asked with a grin. "I should think that that would be just the time when you needed a young man about."

"Not this young man, I can assure you," returned Mrs. Adams; and in so dry a tone that the doctor's wife, large and plain and good-humored, looked across at her and began to laugh.

She had grown sons of her own; scattered now over the face of the earth farming, or building railroads and bridges, in far distant colonies.

"John said he was extremely intelligent but had no sort of use for women—the modern variety at any rate."

Mrs. Manisty laid down the shirt upon which she had been languidly sewing seams.

"Where can he have been brought up?" she exclaimed.

"Some outlandish place," returned the Rector's wife.

"I do think that attitude is so ridiculous in these days.

Surely he must realise that the meek, dependent type of woman has now disappeared almost completely. And as a sex she has come into her own at last," continued Mrs. Manisty.

A deeply assenting murmur from the seven or eight other ladies gathered there to demonstrate their eleemosynary talents upon shirts for natives rose on the austere Rectory atmosphere.

"Yes, indeed—come into her own at last. And proved that she can do anything—and time too," intoned Miss Ethel Simpson, whose personal endeavors to win parliamentary recognition for her sex before the war had resulted, at one time or another, in a series of regrettably violent collisions with the county authorities.

That she was a daughter of the Lord of the Manor had alone, to her outspoken disgust, saved her from the monotony of a considerable penal existence more than once.

That she was not permitted to "suffer" as she phrased it, because the local magistracy as a body—who had known her from childhood—always saw to it that her fines were paid one way or the other, had been a source of the keenest chagrin to her. And still, looked at in retrospect, had the power to cause her much bitterness of soul. Men being so unfair.

"Does the poor, purblind fool not realise how shamefully—and that's a mild term—man has bungled his task of governing the world? Rapine, murder, and sudden death have ever lurked in the undergrowth. Injustice and tyranny have been his handmaids——"

Her eloquence was halted by Charlotte's suggesting wickedly that "handmaids" was hardly the exactly felicitous term to use in that connection.

Miss Simpson thus pulled up at the very outset of her speech regarded young England coldly.

"What's wrong with the word?" she snapped.

Charlotte giggled.

"Pages would have been more in keeping, surely," she suggested.

"I see what you mean. But that was only a figure of speech, Charlotte Manisty. Moreover, the idea of symbolizing such tremendous forces as tyranny and injustice merely by a couple of nasty little boys, always up to mischief, seems to me much too frivolous. Besides when I was young I was taught that it was very rude to interrupt my elders. Anyway, it's high time woman put a spoke in man's wheel."

"I dare say," said Charlotte indifferently.

Mrs. Burchell laughed again.

"Well, as far as I can make out, that's what woman seems to have already done to him for a few centuries. And especially, and very literally, to the young recluse upstairs. Don't forget it was a woman driver of a Ford car who ran into his much more expensive machine, and not only ditched him but broke his arm into the bargain, the other afternoon on the Esher Road. And it makes him very impatient, poor lad, so John says."

Miss Simpson frowned severely upon Mrs. Burchell.

"Then he should learn self-control. Probably he was going much too fast. And it was entirely his own fault. But men are such children if they get a little hurt. It's amazing how they think they should rule and order us about when a finger ache makes them turn the house upside down with lamentation and behave like——"

"A green girl," put in Nettie suddenly. "That's what Cassius said about Cæsar."

She had been taking a doubtful interest in this historical play of Shakespeare during the preceding term partly because she had an idea she would like to sing the rôle of Cleopatra some day and partly because Paul had informed her that a bowing acquaintance with the classics would be imperative if she wished to appear at Covent Garden.

"And then there was nothing about the silly woman in

that play after all," she had complained bitterly to him later. "I wish I had not wasted my time over a lot of stupid plotters."

But now the allusion struck her as apposite and happy.

"Did he?" said Miss Simpson vaguely, who prided herself on her detestation of all poetry. "But I don't see——"

"It didn't make Cæsar any the less great," added Nettie a little unkindly.

Miss Simpson thus for the second time baited by Clara Manisty's progeny flushed up to the roots of her sandy hair.

"I do hope," she said after some moments of pregnant silence, "you are not going to revert to type, my dear."

"Why should I?"

"And hold a candle to every unfledged, callow youth you happen to know."

Nettie opposed to this an expression of bland innocence.

"I would if I could singe their tails—like somebody did the devil's once. Martin Luther I think it was."

Such levity Mrs. Adams could not allow to pass unrebuked.

"I am surprised at you, Nettie," she said. "It is not clever to be impious. Far, far from it. And pertness is not attractive in a young girl either. I am sure your mother must have told you that—often."

"Again and again," admitted Mrs. Manisty on a rising note of acrimony.

"But about this young man who got turned into the ditch——" began Charlotte, who was getting extremely tired of the interchange of hostilities in the circle about her.

"Yes?"

"What made him come here?"

Mrs. Adams shrugged her shoulders.

"It was the Rector's suggestion. He happened to be, most unfortunately, passing at the time. And he drove the boy first to Doctor Burchell who attended to his arm and said he was suffering from shock. Shock—at his age.

So Cecil brought him back here, and he has turned the house upside down ever since; and given Kirsty the time of her life, it seems to me."

This was an explanation indeed.

"Kirsty is a born nurse," said Mrs. Burchell warmly.

"I thought she was up in Scotland," said Charlotte looking annoyed. "She might have let me know she was in these parts. But I suppose she wanted to keep this wounded hero to herself."

"She came down for the flower show," continued Mrs. Adams, taking no notice of Charlotte's acid comment. "The young man met with his accident the day before she had settled to go back."

"And so she stayed."

"Yes—she stayed."

Walking homewards shortly after Charlotte demanded of her mother a complete history of this intriguing young man's coming and his stay within their community.

"Who is he, for Heaven's sake? And what made him motor in this out-of-the-way place? Is he rich?"

"That I don't know," returned Mrs. Manisty, answering the last question first. "But he is paying the Adams for his keep—I do know that. And I believe he was on some kind of tour, in his car, when the accident happened. He is, I understand, a foreigner."

"What is his name?"

Clara Manisty shook her head.

"Really, Charlotte, you do want to know so much. I am not interested in young men. Nettie could tell you much more about him, I expect."

Nettie looked very wise.

"His name is Nicolas something, I think. Could it have been Vaurien? It was something like that, anyway."

"Doesn't sound very rich to me," sighed Charlotte.

"Or very reputable," added Nettie critically.

"What makes you say that?" enquired her mother.

"Vaurien means a good-for-nothing in my French gram-

mar," returned Nettie unctuously. "If he's at all like his name——"

"He's sure to be very charming—they always are," said Charlotte.

"At least he had a jolly car."

Charlotte turned upon her sister a confidential look.

"And that's always something. I must say I should like to have a look at him. He sounds different, somehow."

CHAPTER 2

KIRSTY MCLEOD, the Rector's niece, who was perhaps really in a position to state authoritatively whether her invalid was "different" or not from other young men of his age had been, up to date, far too engaged in an almost hourly tussle with his appalling obstinacy and petulance to realise more than that as an experienced nurse she had an unusually fractious and wayward, if at times engaging, person to deal with. For the last ten days in which he had lain, more or less at her mercy, in the Rectory spare bedroom had been full of incident for her. Every trick that ingenuity could suggest to him he had played on her in order to upset and discompose her. In fact he was easily the worst patient she had ever had.

However, faced with his ridiculously mutinous behavior, Kirsty had merely become daily more firm and remotely official of demeanor. And, ably seconded by Dr. Burchell, had maintained the strictest of regimens and rules over him for his unwilling discipline and government. Even so he kept her on the jump. For he was full of a teasing resource.

"I can't think why you are so trying," she would remark, to his intense satisfaction, exasperatedly a dozen times a day. "How can you expect to get well if you will try to do so much for yourself? Don't you understand, yet, you've had concussion as well as a broken arm? Badly broken, too. What am I for, anyway?"

"General police work, oh healer of smashed-up bones," he would reply mischievously. "And very efficient at the job, too. It's a pity, however, you are not plainer of fea-

ture. For then your slave would not find it so distressing to watch you hauling heavy pieces of furniture about the apartment as you have a habit of doing when not engaged in actively chastising a most refractory—oh, yes, it must be admitted—and savage patient."

"If you know you are all these things why can't you reform?"

Then his dark features would become irradiated with that smile she found so amazingly irresistible.

Kirsty could never help laughing at these moments.

"It's a mercy you've got some grace in you, at least. But you'll never get out of this room, my man, till the doctor allows it. Let you struggle as much as you like."

"But it's all so absurd—I'm nearly well already."

"You are not."

"And you can stand there in that most becoming nurse's get-up of yours and tell such a whooping lie. Why, I've had no fever for days."

"It's not a lie—and how do you know what fever you've had—or not? Only this morning you were prostrate with the worst kind of headache."

"Oh, that——"

He shrugged the unimportant hours of pain away.

"It's gone now at any rate. And I'm bored. And I want to be amused."

He cast a sidelong glance at her.

"You ought to amuse me——"

"What a barbaric idea."

But he, quite unabashed, declared that to be part of woman's business.

Kirsty laughed again.

"I wish my aunt's sewing circle downstairs could hear you."

"Is this the afternoon when they all come and chalk up a bit for their heavenly record?"

"It is," said Kirsty. "They'd soon tell you where you got off."

He moved restlessly on his pillows.

"I detest old women," he said irritably. "And I'm proud of being a barbarian. We agreed on that point days ago."

"Well, barbarian or not, you've got to behave now. That cut on your head is not doing as well as it might."

At this he looked amused.

"Stupid of it," he said. "But if you'd only let me get out——"

"And go roaming about all by yourself? Not likely," returned Kirsty decidedly.

His eyes wandered past her to the window out of which he had been looking idly earlier that afternoon.

"But if I promised I'd get into no sort of mischief?"

Kirsty also glanced out of the window.

The garden below looked empty and innocent enough.

"You can go on promising."

From amongst his many pillows he looked up at her contemplatively.

"I saw quite a pretty girl down there just now," he said. "A man cannot alter his fate—that is certain. I should have liked to talk to her. She looked like a flower—but very probably she has a temperament much more like steel. And now you keep me here tied by the leg."

"Entirely for your own good."

"One must then submit oneself to the will of Allah. It is useless to kick against the pricks——"

Said Kirsty solemnly:

"I wish you had thought of that sooner."

"Let us hope that there is some reason for my having to be kept a prisoner here so long. At this moment there are a thousand things I should be doing."

He lay watching the clouds race across the sky outside for some moments with a very discontented expression on his face until Kirsty, bringing him a tonic drink, laughed as she slipped an arm under his head.

"You're not naturally polite," she said

He drank the bitter draught down, made a face, and looking up at her remarked:

"You know I'm not impolite in my heart. I'm under the deepest of obligations to you. But I want to go out—and look my absurd racer over. Imagine being done in by a cheap car of that description. It is like being run over by a donkey cart. Too humiliating!"

"Better a donkey cart than an express train—if you have to be run over."

But staring at her vaguely he was quite obviously not attending to what she was saying.

"You always look at life so practically," he grumbled after a time.

"That's because I possess a Scotch father," Kirsty explained.

"Oh," said he.

"The Scotch are a very practical nation; they have to be."

"Well, one has to take one's parents as they come. But have you no romance about you?"

Kirsty looked very wise.

"And me over thirty and a sick-nurse," she returned solemnly. "Go away with you, young man. And do not seek to undermine the general seriousness of my character. What are you thinking about?"

After that he watched her moving about the room attending to various small duties in a puzzled silence for some time. She was a type he did not comprehend although she attracted him enormously.

"Do you believe in woman's rights?" he shot at her finally.

"What kind?" asked Kirsty cautiously.

"Oh, I don't know. Any kind—all kinds."

Brandishing a feather brush with which she had been dusting the ornaments on the mantelpiece, Kirsty came and stood before him.

"I'm too busy to bother about such abstract things," she

informed him decidedly. "And believe me, if more people did the jobs they were equal to—conscientiously——"

She met his amused look with one as unaffectedly entertained, and then turning briskly back to her dusting again, dismissed the dramatic question of woman's rights and wrongs a shade contemptuously, he thought.

Nicolas Vaurien—if that were his name—continued to lie staring pensively out of the window for some time.

"Yes, I suppose rights are very abstract things," he remarked at last. "Not like claims or privileges. Well, on the whole, that's what I should have expected you to say."

Kirsty opened her eyes at this decided estimate of her character, and then laughed at his ruminative tone.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you are one of those people who go to the root of things."

"One has to, young sir, in a hospital."

"Yet you have the gentlest hands."

"And why not?" demanded Kirsty indignantly. "Do you suppose I am in the habit of grappling with my patients as if they were grand pianos?"

Nicolas measured her with a lazy look.

"Now don't flash your eyes at me," he begged, and laughed that low, infrequent laugh so characteristic of him, and which from the first she had found almost as attractive as his smile. "Because I can't bear it."

"Nonsense," said Kirsty.

"No," he continued aggravatingly, "it's no good trying to impress upon me that you are a domestic tyrant—when every day shows me more clearly you haven't got one of the necessary qualities about you. You were never cut out for a shrew."

"Thanks for the stimulating encomium," said Kirsty.

"But of course you ought to be married and not wasted on this kind of life," he finished firmly.

Sheer astonishment at the abrupt change of subject be-

reft Kirsty of speech at first, and made her drop her feather brush. Then, to his great distress, he saw her eyes fill with tears.

"I shall never marry," she said in a low tone, almost as though the words were wrung from her; and turning her back on him stooped hurriedly to pick her brush up from the carpet.

The sudden change in her from the genial, carefree being he had learned to know, as he thought so well, to a strange and almost tragically grief-stricken woman astonished him so that at first he could do no more than regard her in a concerned silence. Then——

"I'm a pig—a hound—a yellow dawg," he cried, full of contrition. "Kirsty, Kirsty, forgive me. You know I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

Her back still obstinately turned to him, "I know it," she murmured.

But this was not enough.

"Come here," he cried coaxingly, "and let me see your face. I can't believe you don't hate me—till you look at me. Ah, come now, Kirsty, and I swear I'll apologize in seven languages."

The force with which he said this made her laugh.

"I don't believe you can speak seven," she retorted.

"Yes, I can."

"What a talented young fellow you must be."

"Hard working," said he.

But he refused to be put off.

"Now, Kirsty," he begged, "please don't stand there like a statue dedicated to chilly reproof. Turn and smile upon your slave. You know," he repeated vehemently, "I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"Please don't give it another thought—you couldn't know."

"But I must and shall—I'm much too fond of you not to detest myself for having been such a thoughtless brute."

He waited for a moment before, as she made no movement, he burst out most impatiently again. "Must I roll off the sofa to kiss the hem of your apron and knock my head nine times on the ground in token of my profound wretchedness of soul at having caused you pain? It was insufferable of me to be so thoughtless—but I swear I'll get up this minute—if you don't come here at once."

Apparently immediately determined to execute this threat, Kirsty had barely time to hurl herself across the intervening space and fling herself upon him, holding him down with a ruthless grasp.

"Not so gentle with the hand work now," he grinned.

"I do wish you'd behave sensibly sometimes," she scolded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Who brought you up?"

"Myself," he told her complacently.

"Then I can't congratulate you. Where's the sense in making me act like Charles the Wrestler, or something, to reduce you to ordinary decent behavior?"

The energy of her tone seemed to please him tremendously.

"That's the stuff," he muttered, and allowed Kirsty to fairly shake him in her exasperation at his provoking conduct. Perhaps it was what he intended her reaction to his maneuver to be.

"I know," he continued easily, "I'm a wretch. But you ought to be perfectly aware of what a rascally nature is mine by this time. And I might point out that it is unnecessary for you to be quite so vigorous in your actions for all that. For you are sitting heavily on my stomach at the moment," he complained loudly. "And I think you've shoved it right through to the other side. And that won't be very convenient for me."

"And if I have, whose fault is it?" returned Kirsty with spirit.

"Also your cap is all on one side. Really you look very dishevelled, Miss McLeod."

Kirsty made as though she would have boxed his ears and began to laugh again.

"Splendid," said he.

"If you'll promise not to behave like an idiot—I'll get up."

"I promise."

He caught her hand and kissed it as she rose.

"One of my foreign tricks," he said mischievously. "All right—I'm going to behave. But am I forgiven?"

Kirsty patted his hand.

"You know very well you're forgiven—silly creature," she returned as she set her cap straight and smoothed her rumpled apron.

It was at this moment that their attention was completely diverted to the garden below them once more, as it became for a short time filled with Mrs. Adams' charitably inclined, departing ladies; all talking volubly about nothing in particular.

"Look," said Kirsty, moving into the window recess, "there they all go. A day's march nearer heaven, I suppose, by reason of their good works."

Nicolas followed her glance interestedly, raising himself on his sound elbow, the better to attain a more comprehensive view of the animated scene.

"Their good works certainly don't seem to have rendered them over gay," he pointed out. "Take that one, for instance, over there, walking with a lanky child, in a dress the color of desert sand—very unbecoming it is for her type, too—she looks quite wilted. Sewing shirts for the heathen has taken a good bit out of her."

Kirsty contemplated the couple he described so satirically.

"That's Mrs. Manisty," she said. "She always looks worn out after one of my aunt's sewing sessions. Besides, she's a widow and very badly off. And she possesses three hearty, hungry children to feed and clothe and start in life. And I don't believe she's up to it—she's too indolent, naturally."

"What are her children, girls or boys?"

"Two female, one male."

"Ah."

"And Henrietta, whom you perceive walking beside her, is a young limb if there ever was one——"

Nicolas, his eyes on the erratically receding figure of the skipping and jumping Nettie, laughed.

"A limb—of what?" he demanded.

"Mischief," returned Kirsty laconically. "The purest kind, too."

"Ah," said he, "I apprehend your meaning, lady."

"She's always in a state of waging war——"

"Belligerent by nature, eh?"

Kirsty nodded. "Pugnacious and self-opinionated to the last degree."

"Possessed by Shaitan—I wouldn't wonder. She looks to have spirit," he said. "I wonder how she would get on amongst my people."

Kirsty looked at him curiously—it was the first time she had heard him mention his people.

"She reminds me of my grandmother—a very active personage," he went on. "Always knew her own mind. Well, I'm inclined to believe that the young person out there would either rule—or be broken."

"Amongst your people?"

"Yes."

Kirsty shrugged her shoulders.

"Nettie," she observed, "could never be squashed. She possesses one of those happy natures rather like a large India rubber ball. And she bounces high and often—if you get what I mean."

Her patient was about to make some careless rejoinder when he caught sight of another figure walking at that instant out of the gate. Before then she had been almost completely hidden in a group of head-shaking, and nodding, earnest workers. He uttered an abrupt exclamation.

"There's that charmingly pretty girl again," he cried.

"What did she have to waste her time amongst the salvation hunters for? Why on earth couldn't she have come up and entertained us for a bit? Instead of sewing, I don't doubt, very badly downstairs, ridiculously inadequate garments for native wear; surrounded by most ancient tabby cats. They couldn't possibly appreciate her. I'm sure an hour up here would have been far more stimulating for her."

Kirsty did not attempt to hide her mirth at such a naïve proposal.

"My goodness," she rejoined, "Charlotte Manisty amuse you—or anyone else. No, no, she would certainly expect the shoe to be on the other foot. If you only knew how bored she is already at having to spend the summer holidays amongst us in the country!"

"Where does she live?" he asked.

"Oh, down the road near our little river. A white house standing rather back in its own grounds, and almost at the edge of the woods. I expect she'll be very annoyed with me because I've not been to see her since she came home—especially as I've been nursing you. You're quite a mysteriously romantic figure about here. And Charlotte would love to hear all the gossip——"

"About me?" he asked.

"Yes," said Kirsty, "amongst other things. Only we don't know much about you, fair sir."

"There's nothing to know," he rejoined. "I have the usual father and mother, and motor car, and many debts."

Kirsty laughed.

"Is she betrothed yet?" he demanded suddenly.

"My dear man, don't you know that in this community we are mainly elderly and settled people? Young men shun us—as they would the plague."

"That seems hard on——"

"Poor Charlotte?"

"Yes."

"But she's plenty of time before her to upset you all."

"How old is she?"

"About eighteen or nineteen. And she takes a great interest in young men."

"And quite right, too, at her age," he retorted briskly. "All the more reason why she should have been given an opportunity to take an interest in me."

Such egotistical arrogance made Kirsty shake her head gravely.

"How conceited you are," she cried severely. "How do you know Charlotte would have looked at you? Well, I dare say she'll get that opportunity yet," she ended teasingly, "and then—we shall see."

But how close that opportunity already loomed up fortunately for her peace of mind was mercifully hidden from Miss McLeod. And as all through that evening her patient behaved with a touching and exemplary docility and charm—playing several games of Russian Banque with her and eating his simple supper for once with appetizing despatch—lulled into, as it later proved, a false security, Kirsty finally tucked him up in bed and bade him goodnight with a feeling of serenity to which she had been now for some days a stranger. Indeed, had she been challenged then she would have been ready to wager that there was nothing rash or harmful he could embark on for the next few hours. Yet had she known him better, his very meekness should have been a warning.

"If you were always like this you would soon be well," she told him in her happy ignorance of his intentions, her hand upon the china door knob.

"But that would be so dull for us both."

"It's a kind of dullness I could do with. Anyway I hope you get a good night's rest now. And that head of yours doesn't bother you too much."

"It's in splendid condition—hard as a cannon ball."

"Well—be that as it may. Pleasant dreams——"

"Those I have already," he assured her with a twinkle in his eye. "As for the rest, that remains with Allah.

But an evening so balmy and filled with the light of so gracious a moon should promise magic and romance, at least."

Kirsty smiled as she departed.

"So long as you confine it to your dreams," she said as she shut the door behind her.

2.

Charlotte had found, when she reached home, a letter awaiting her which bore a foreign stamp and postmark.

"From Thérèse," she said, as she picked it up from the oak hat-stand in the hall.

Nettie, who had already dived into the dining-room in search of an errant Paul, ran up to her sister.

"Open it quick," she commanded. "There may be real news in it."

Struck by so energetically inquisitive a tone, Clara Manisty, in the act of slowly ascending the greenly carpeted stairs, to her comfortable, many-pillowed sofa and the latest noteworthy novel, from the bow-windowed lending library in the sleepy High Street, paused just long enough to stare suspiciously over the banisters at her two tiresomely whispering girls below, and call out sharply:

"News—what on earth news could that middle-aged French governess whose friendship you affect have to bestow on you, Charlotte? I hope she is not influencing you in a wrong direction. And that this does not signify that you contemplate throwing up your position at Methpeden and embarking on some absurd wild goose chase or other. Don't forget that steady situations are not too easy to come by. News indeed—what does Nettie mean?"

For as yet she was completely in the dark as to that revolutionary scheme for Charlotte's immediate future formulated by Thérèse de la Motte. Or that her daughter was contemplating abandoning her musical duties at Miss

Trout's school. For Charlotte had up to then not seen fit to confide the smallest shred of the idea to her parent. Oddly proud of her as she was, and yet oddly jealous of her too, Charlotte felt that her mother would have listened to the design in an icily opposed silence, and then have taken the first opportunity to write to Thérèse forbidding her explicitly to go on with it in any way, shape or form. Moreover, though her French friend, in bidding her farewell, some eight days previously, had actively pledged herself to its execution during the ensuing holiday weeks, Charlotte had not felt any very great confidence that the efforts of Thérèse would be crowned with success. And consequently had been more than usually disinclined to open so debatable a subject with her mother before she must.

It might be, as Thérèse assured her, that if not Madame de Dasulas—why then some one else in the French nation must be pining for her services; but even so, Charlotte suffered from a lurking suspicion that the whole project was very dubious, though distinctly alluring, and in consequence the least said about it the soonest mended.

And as her creed, if she possessed such a thing, mainly consisted of two beliefs—the first being that what the eye cannot perceive the heart will never waste time grieving over, and the second much of the same character, namely: that doubtful information kept to oneself cannot become a subject for acrimonious discussion or party strife—she had deliberately put aside all consideration of the possibility, even in her own active brain, of her having to cross the Channel in the near future, the better to earn, and possibly less wearisomely, her daily bread.

Now, after bestowing on her choking sister one swiftly warning glance, she called up to Clara Manisty impatiently:

"Oh, Mother, that's just Nettie's theatrical way of expressing herself. I wonder you take the least notice of it."

Then administering a furtive push to the still giggling

Nettie—to whom the situation appeared as an exquisite jest—she followed her mother at a safe distance into the upper part of the house. But it was not till she and the over-exuberant Henrietta were safely shut away in their untidy back room that she made any attempt to open the envelope she held in her hand. Then, casting her hat upon the nearest piece of furniture, she flung herself on her bed, lit a cigarette, and sending long spirals of meditative smoke into the air, started to read her communication.

"I wish she would not write in French," she muttered discontentedly, after a period devoted to a frowning study of the lengthy missive.

"Good practice for you," returned her sister. "Something tells me you will be in France before long."

But Charlotte, deep in the study of the Gallic tongue and the information it afforded, was not attending, and again there befell a protracted silence.

During this interval Nettie amused herself by humming "A Life on the Ocean Wave," in a key that was a good two semi-tones too low for her. The effect partaking therefore more or less of a strange vocal rumbling in her boots.

Suddenly Charlotte broke in upon her musical effort with a queerly agitated cry of, "Beauséant! Beauséant! If Thérèse has not managed to pull it off after all!"

Her vehement and ringing use of the Templar war cry—an ancient private signal amongst the three young Manistys, designed to inform those in the know of spirited work afoot, but one which Charlotte had abandoned of late years as too childish to employ longer—revealed as nothing else could have done to the anticipative Henrietta how thrilling she found the news her epistle contained.

"I knew I was right," crowed Nettie, observing with unconcealed amusement that already a transformation had been effected in her sister's air, and that now, all animation, she appeared ready to embark on her odyssey at a moment's notice. Therefore, still sprawling idly as she was, half out of the open window upon the elderly cretonne-covered

settee beneath it, she continued peremptorily, "Don't keep me waiting, Lotta. Go on—read it out. You can translate as you go."

But this Charlotte was disinclined to do, averring that it was all too involved to read aloud.

"But the gist of it is that this Madame de Dasulas wants a companion after all——"

"Soon?"

"Yes, it seems so. Let me see——"

Charlotte turned a page.

"What does she want you for exactly?"

"Oh, to travel with her—keep her amused—listen to her all day politely—read out loud to her—go out driving with her—what are a *dame de compagnie's* duties?"

"It doesn't sound very alluring to me. Do you think you shall like it better than Miss Trout's school?"

"Well—she is going to spend the winter in Morocco."

"Morocco," repeated Nettie slowly, "that ought to be glamorous. Arabs and all that, and bazaars, and drums beating continually, and narrow streets with camels and donkeys filling 'em up——"

"All probably terribly smelly," Charlotte pointed out, whose practical strain lay ever near the surface. "But even so, can't you see what a change it will be for me?"

"Yes, I can see that."

"And I am to go to her in Paris—if my references are satisfactory."

"Of course they'll be," said Nettie, "what could old Trout have against you?"

"She might not like me leaving her so suddenly."

"Nonsense, you know there are millions of girls wanting to teach music."

"And why?" sighed Charlotte.

"It's a respectable ambition—like playing on the concert platform, or taking private singing engagements. But not singing in opera, or going on the stage Because you

never know when you may have to wear tights, or nothing at all."

"Nettie!"

"But that's the solemn truth."

"Where do you get these ideas?" asked Charlotte.

"Born with them probably," returned the unrepentant Henrietta serenely. "Nobody can help the ideas they are born with. Who cares, anyway?"

But whether she was alluding to her brain processes or the regrettable practices she was ascribing to the stage was not very clear.

"But you go on with your letter," she continued.

"Well, I'm sure I behaved like a saint while I was with that beldame Trout," said Charlotte.

She sighed deeply.

"I've always longed to go to Paris."

"When do you start?" inquired Nettie.

Charlotte rose to cast a long, considering look upon a flaming, pictured wall calendar close at hand—the property of her sister—and began to add up days into weeks in a low voice.

"Not so far away," she said at last. "Less than a month, as a matter of fact. That is, if everything goes straight."

"Which it never will in this world," yawned Nettie.

Then she lounged over to the bed on which Charlotte had left her letter and picked it up.

"Let me read it, Lotta—I understand the Gallic tongue."

"Marvelous," said Charlotte. "I thought you hated the grind of studying foreign languages. But you can read it." Having finished her cigarette, she lit another and began to pace up and down the room thoughtfully. "I shall need a lot of new clothes," she said.

"Certainly—but you can do nothing before you've told Mother. And judging by what she said just now, I don't envy you that job."

"Oh, well, she says more than she means always. I expect I can get round her."

"Perhaps you should have prepared the ground before this," and Nettie waved the sheets of paper in the air.

"No," said Charlotte decidedly. "I never meant to say a word till there was something definite to impart to our progenitor. You knew what a habit she has of throwing cold water. It amounts to a mania with her."

Nettie nodded.

"But perhaps I'd better go and interview her now."

"No time like the present," returned Nettie absently, struggling as she was at the moment with a long and complicated phrase, the sense of which was entirely dark to her. "Does she say you have to hunt boars as one of your duties—the country around Tangiers being full of them. That seems an unusual kind of duty for a companion."

Charlotte came to look over her sister's shoulder.

"That's only Thérèse trying to be scholastic and impart knowledge to the ignorant——"

"Knowledge is always power," intoned Nettie.

Charlotte refused to be impressed.

"What do I care if Tangiers is full of wild pigs—if they don't bother me? I imagine we shan't keep them as pets."

Nettie began to giggle again.

"Also the country is full of heather, making it a little like Scotland," she translated with a grin.

"I do wish Thérèse could forget she is a teacher now and then."

"Well," said Nettie, handing back the letter to Charlotte, "at any rate I know now something about Morocco, which I didn't before. So I can look intelligent and hand out my two pieces of information during the next few days where they will be most helpful."

She assumed a mincing air, and, taking a step or two into the center of the room, shook hands warmly with the air.

"Yes, indeed it is a chance for dear Charlotte. She was so dissatisfied at home. Heather all over the place, my dear, would you believe it! Why, she'll hardly know

she's left Surrey. And pig-sticking goes on every day of the week. Oh, perfectly wild—not the kind that makes bacon at all."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Charlotte, rather angrily to this, "I see nothing to make fun of."

But Nettie continued to pirouette about the room, laughing happily to herself.

"You wouldn't," she said, "seeing as how you have little or no sense of humor. But you go and tell Mother now—that's my advice to you. She's not doing a thing but lying down. Keeping up her vitality for supper."

Still Charlotte looked dubious.

"Go on—get it over," urged Henrietta.

Curiously enough, when the whole scheme was laid before her, although Clara Manisty made it the occasion for one of her sermons on the ingratitude of modern children, she found very little to dislike seriously in it. To be honest, as a plan the thing attracted her on the whole. Though Morocco did seem to her a wild kind of place for an elderly person's choice in the matter of holiday residence.

"Nice or Rome would be so much more appropriate, one would think," she said, "still I suppose French people have different ideas to us."

Then she paused and sighed.

"But whatever you do, Charlotte, don't you dare to bring me back as a son-in-law one of those fierce looking Arabs."

"As if I should," said Charlotte testily.

But she saw that it was merely a piece of rhetoric on Mrs. Manisty's part, who, truth to tell, was secretly relieved at the prospect of losing a troublesome daughter so decently for what would probably turn out to be a considerable period of time. With any luck she might be gone a year or more. Involuntarily Clara Manisty smiled. Oddly enough the note of opposition remained to be struck by the unconsidered Paul.

"At least, I suppose you'll be with reputable people,"

he remarked severely at supper, where the whole project was being pretty thoroughly canvassed by the assembled Manisty family.

"You funny, old-fashioned child," said his mother.

Paul continued to regard his women folk judicially.

"Well," he returned, "Charlotte is so mad to get away from us—that's the last thing she'd think of. But I suppose this French person is all right, and the girl knows what she's in for."

Justly incensed at his patronizing tone, Charlotte allowed herself to forget for the time being that she was grown up and flung a nut at him—they were then at the nut-and-apple stage of the meal—which he caught neatly.

"Well fielded," said Nettie in her deep voice.

"You ridiculous little ape," cried Charlotte, "how dare you be so impudent?"

"I'm certainly not impudent," returned Paul calmly, cracking the nut. "You are under a complete misapprehension, Charlotte, my lass. I'm the only man in the family, and as far as my old eyesight goes, both you girls possess natures rather like wild asses."

This devastating and uncivil assertion not only further incensed Charlotte, but landed the bouncing Henrietta with both feet in the center of the arena.

"Wild ass yourself," she declaimed truculently. "As for you—you have the judgment of a grasshopper, and the instincts of a locust with wild honey. Don't you know you're easily about the most vulgar creature I know?"

"Better be vulgar than foolish," was Paul's unruffled comeback to this savage attack. "Let me tell you, with these foreign chaps you want to keep a sharp lookout. I looked up Morocco in the Encyclopædia before supper—and although it said the Moors have an older civilization than our own, Henrietta, my girl, I got a general impression they behave pretty queerly just the same."

"Indeed," jeered Nettie, "and you never any farther than Boulogne on a day trip. Besides, Charlotte isn't

going to a Moor's family. From the way you go on you might think she was going to be a perfect Desdemona."

Paul remained unaffected by the ridicule she cast upon him.

"Sense doesn't come by travelling," he observed coldly, "it's natural to one, or it isn't. Now Charlotte has no sense—visible to the naked eye."

But perceiving that her elder daughter now looked to be on the verge of apoplexy, Mrs. Manisty judged it time to take the conversation into her own hands.

"Come, Paul," she therefore began serenely, "I do wish you'd learn to mind your own affairs. I am the best judge of what is fitting for Charlotte to undertake. I have read Mademoiselle de la Motte's letter most carefully. And of course, before I dream of allowing your sister to take this position, every inquiry will be made. Naturally Mr. Kingsbury will have to be consulted before any decision is come to."

"So you can just hold your silly tongue," interrupted Nettie rudely. "Wild asses, indeed! You're a zebra and a kangaroo and a rhinoceros all rolled into one."

This explosion reduced Paul to a temporary silence, but when they were all leaving the dining-room he caught Henrietta by the arm.

"I bet old Kingsbury doesn't give his consent," he muttered. "He won't take any stock in Morocco. Paris would have been doubtful—but he'll have fits at the very idea of Africa. Expecting Charlotte to be punctually kidnapped by hostile tribesmen at least once a week."

In the background Charlotte, overhearing this speech, as indeed Paul meant her to, scowled heavily. She was more dampened by this unwelcome suggestion, in which her common sense told her there was a good deal of very unpalatable truth, than she cared to admit. But she deliberately ignored her brother's provocative speech, considering it beneath her dignity to bandy any more words with him that evening, though she caught Nettie's grin of

appreciation at such a display of worldly wisdom on Paul's part.

For a considerable time she remained in a corner of the drawing-room sofa, sombrely regarding the Brussels carpet, while her mother's pen scratched a busy way through an extensive letter to her legal adviser. Then, in an aloof and gloomy silence, casting a last glance at Nettie and Paul playing draughts composedly at the round table in the center of the room, she betook herself upstairs to the bathroom to wash her hair.

Throughout the lengthy process she reflected more and more uneasily upon the dire possibility Paul had so callously presented for her contemplation.

It would be too horrible, she reflected bitterly, to be thwarted by an unsympathetic, narrow-minded old fellow like Jeremiah Kingsbury in this new and glowing hope of escape from the consuming dullness of her present mode of life.

"How can I ever arrive anywhere if I don't start?" she mused. "People like old Kingsbury should not be allowed to have so much power over people who aren't even relations. What's a guardian, anyway?"

Thus recklessly reflecting, Charlotte came to the conclusion she would not allow herself to be hindered by any interfering old man at the very outset of an expedition upon which moment by moment, the more she thought of it, she was becoming more set. No matter what her elders did or said, she would for once go her own way. For now the journey to France—with Morocco in the background—appeared more desirable to her than anything else in the world.

Charlotte found herself smiling.

It might easily mean everything to her in romance and fortune.

This was a fascinating thought—which Charlotte felt was more than likely to be a prophetic one. After all travel, and a foreign life, was all she needed. A start—

as it were. Left to herself she could do the rest. Opportunity must and should knock at her door.

This was again so stimulating a reflection that her smile grew broader as she soaped her hair vigorously.

Yet the darker mood returning a moment after, as a wave to engulf her sand castle, the smile vanished and she sighed heavily. If she was to be stopped at the very beginning of things by sheer stupid insular prejudice, there could be no justice in the world. Such a chance might easily never come her way again.

Sinking now into the depths of a mumpish depression, Charlotte spent the next twenty minutes in rinsing her hair and in being passionately sorry for herself. With a towel round her head at last, she asked herself why *she* must be done out of her destiny. Other people got their own way very easily, it seemed to her. Put thus, the rhetorical question pleased her so much that she followed it up with another well rounded demand. Could she never hope for some small modicum of independence in thought and action? Or must she forever be at the mercy of an out-of-date and thoroughly ridiculous point of view?

By this time, her eyes full of tears and her mood made up of a sullen determination not to be withheld from flight to more attractive spots in the world than her mother's dull little house, so much too full of gimcrack furniture, or the still more restrictive linoleum covered floors of Miss Trout's school, Charlotte began at last languidly to dry her shining hair out of the open window in the warm, scented, moonlit night.

From the drawing-room below there was by this time floating out a Chopin ballade, put on the battered and ill-used victrola by the astute Henrietta. Who, under cover of its melodies, wished to converse confidentially with her brother without fear of being overheard by their lightly sleeping parent upon the sofa. The letter to her solicitor now satisfactorily ended, she had ceased for some time to

even pretend to read any longer the book she had been holding up between herself and the lighted lamp.

Charlotte, listening to the wistful, alluring progressions, felt that she must die of impatient disappointment should she be forced to continue living indefinitely the same dull, objectless life as had been her lot ever since her father's death.

For the first time since she had stood by his already neglected grave, she really mourned her loss.

At least he had managed to support his family. And she had had leisure to dream through her days—to do as much or as little as she liked. To refuse to shoulder any kind of responsibility. This being perhaps what she dreaded most in the world. It was not as if she had been born ambitious like Paul or her sister. Far from it, Charlotte was well aware that simple things would always content her. Simple but probably costly, a cynic might have reminded her. A little gaiety, pretty clothes, pleasant people, not too encumbered with brains, and an assured income—that was all she would ever ask of life. Not so much, after all, measured against Nettie's tremendous demands and selfish assurance. To be famous—that she had no wish to be. The very idea troubled her. Yes indeed, all she desired was a cultivated life of leisure—unhurried, serene. But now hers was merely an ugly existence of the most drab monotony. Lived, too, to the clang of a bell which never ceased all day long. Every hour marked by its fierce clamor.

Resolutely once more she determined to make a fight for it, never to resign herself to grow elderly and fretful in the hatefully circumscribed environment of alternate school and home. Yes, she would certainly make a strenuous bid for freedom. She must try her wings. She would not waste her youth and her beauty—which she was well aware she possessed—in a merely provincial society that could never value it. Might even be critically jealous of her unusual flower-like charm. Before long she would shake

herself free of its petty decorums and its neat, stultifying rules.

Engrossed as she was in these rebellious reflections, and engaged in satisfactorily building up long and impassioned orations to be tried out later if necessary on whosoever barred her way—let it be old Kingsbury himself—she was leaning out over the window sill, her shoulders covered only with the thinnest of muslin wraps, absently combing her hair, when she was startled from her stormy dreams and her self-communing by the sound of a cautious, but distinctly male, voice; addressing her, apparently. And in the most fantastic terms. Proceeding, it seemed, from the depths of the shrubbery which bounded two sides of their carelessly kept croquet lawn.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel," it begged softly yet clearly, "let down your golden hair—though I am bound to admit it looks a mass of spun glass in this amazing moonlight—so that your slave may climb up by that magic ladder and converse elegantly with you."

Frankly taken aback by the airy impertinence of this too utterly absurd request, Charlotte was at first inclined to pretend weakly she had not heard the highly improper inquiry. Then, very certain that no inhabitant of their singularly correct neighborhood could have, drunk or sober, ever proposed such a thing, a natural curiosity invaded her to find out who the audacious stranger could be.

Therefore, Charlotte, flinging her bright hair over her shoulders, turned and looked over the half acre of grass and foliage that lay bathed in the rays of the silver moon, now well above the treetops, between the pointed gables of the house and the dark mass of far-flung pinewoods beyond.

But not a sign of human life could she perceive.

For a long three minutes she leaned out of her window, searching the terrain exactly.

Then, as nothing stirred, "I must have been dreaming," she said out loud.

There was a pause—and then the voice resumed.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, be gracious."

This time Charlotte answered it—with a marked and chilly hauteur.

"You have made a mistake, whoever you may be. This is the twentieth century and England. Not a scene in a fairy tale or an opera."

"Though you must admit everything about here looks rather like one."

"But I have no imagination," replied Charlotte, "of that kind." And made a movement to close her window.

That it was half-hearted did not go unremarked by the audacious intruder on her solitude.

"Don't do anything rash," begged the voice, which held an attractive quality she could not help remarking, and which unconsciously had the effect of staying her hand.

"If you knew how lonely I am, and how anxious I have been to talk to you."

"Since when?" demanded Charlotte.

"This afternoon," he returned. "*I* was up at a window then."

"But I can't talk nonsense out of our bath-room window to a perfect stranger."

"But nonsense sometimes is very delightful."

"Unfortunately I am a very serious character," said Charlotte.

"That I cannot believe. Besides, beauty should never be serious—that wrinkles it too soon."

There was the hint of a foreign accent in his speech, Charlotte decided.

"Who are you?" she asked curiously.

"Nobody—a shadow—a voice in the darkness. But forever now your humble servant."

This strophe made Charlotte laugh.

"We might be Romeo and Juliet," she said.

"We might be worse," he returned.

"I have no qualifications for the rôle."

Charlotte was quite decided on this point.

"But I fancy I could play Romeo."

"Let me see you," returned Charlotte to this.

"No," said he firmly.

"But, why not?"

"You might shut the window," he chuckled. "How do I know if you would like the look of me?"

"I don't think that's very reasonable," commented Charlotte. "I hate talking to something I cannot see. And anyway I'm sure you'd better go away now. Anyone hearing me going on like this would think I had gone quite off my head. Talking to—nobody."

There was a pause—then he said: "And they told me you consider yourself everything that is most modern."

Charlotte shook back her hair with an impatient movement.

"Why, so I am," she said quickly. "I never did believe in romance and all that tosh. And I am not in the least like Juliet—so don't flatter yourself."

"All girls are—given the moonlight and the right young man," he returned shamelessly to this.

"Oh."

"But I can see you are colder than an icicle."

This accusation made Charlotte extremely indignant.

"I am not," she said with emphasis.

Here he changed the subject.

"Do you know what beautiful hair you have?"

Charlotte's expression of astonishment was plainly visible to him.

"But it's so old-fashioned—to have long hair. And it's so heavy and such a nuisance."

"It's beautiful — beautiful — beautiful," he returned. "Beauty should be above and beyond mere fashion always."

"Well, I'd rather have it bobbed," she told him.

This seemed to horrify him.

"And throw away one of your most effective weapons! You—modern girl!" His contemptuous tone made Charlotte toss her head like a young colt.

"If you admire long hair you are quite out of date—or probably quite old," she shot back, staring into the warm spaces of the summer night with a look of the deepest disdain upon her face.

"I'm twenty-four," he returned to this challenge.

"Twenty-four," she repeated.

"And quite good looking," he added, "at least, so they tell me. If you like 'em dark."

Suddenly a memory of Nettie's picturesque description of Kirsty's patient that afternoon, as they stood upon the Rector's doorstep, flashed into her mind.

"If you like them foreign and dark and all that—good looking, they say, in a kind of hard, hawk-like way."

Could this be Nicolas Vaurien, escaped from the clutches of respectability and the Adams' house?

Charlotte began to feel quite interested.

"Please tell me who you are," she coaxed.

"No, I'm just a shadow—I told you so before."

"All right," said she, "that being the case, as I don't love shadows—being one of the children of light—I'll certainly shut this window."

"And quite time, too," said Nettie behind her. "What on earth are you doing talking to yourself like a lunatic, Charlotte? And why isn't your hair dry yet?"

Charlotte, feeling her sister's hand on her head, swung round.

"I wasn't talking," she began, and then suddenly sensible that silence at this juncture might after all be the better part, strangled the rest of the sentence in her throat. "What has brought you up here—snooping round?" she demanded frostily. "I do wish you'd get out of that habit of stealing about like a burglar. You only want a black mask and jersey to be complete. No one ever knows where you are. It's a perfectly detestable habit of yours, Nettie."

"That will be sixpence, thank you," said Nettie, unmoved by the rebuke. "Now don't waste your time getting mad about nothing, Lotta. Better me than Mother. She sent

me up to tell you if you want that precious letter of hers to Kingsbury to be put in the post box tonight—you've got to take it yourself."

"Why can't Paul——"

"Oh, Paul!" Nettie exclaimed impatiently. "He's in one of his disagreeable moods. Viewing life with a scornful eye. He won't do a thing he's asked. He says you made game of him at supper and he was hurt at your not appreciating that his kind remarks were dictated by brotherly affection. Those were his own words."

Said Charlotte: "It's surprising how pompous that little jackass can be—though he's not yet quite fourteen. He might be a minor canon, at least. 'Dictated by brotherly affection,' indeed! Where does he dig up those professorial phrases?"

"He may end in the church yet," said Nettie. "But will you take the letter down the road or not? If you won't, it will miss the early post to town most certainly. I can't take it because—though personally I'd just as soon—Mother's all of a dooda because I've sat up half an hour later than usual. Terrible, isn't it? And I am to retire to my little white cot at once. Doesn't my baby wish to grow a big girl?"

Obviously repeating a question put squarely to her, and recently, by her parent, Nettie faithfully mimicked Mrs. Manisty's rather affected manner and voice with a fidelity worthy of a better object than mere satiric caricature. Charlotte, busily doing up her hair, hardly seemed to be listening, but now she moved back to the still open window again to remark in an unusually distinct and penetrating voice: "Very well, you can tell Mother I'll take her precious letter to the pillar box for her. It's a lovely night for a stroll. Where is the document?"

Nettie produced it suddenly, as by some conjuring trick, from the pocket of her frock—a checked yellow and black gingham.

"You've got very good-natured all of a sudden," she said suspiciously. "Was it possible that you were really carry-

ing on a clandestine meeting with some young man out there just now? But who, in the name of Moses and Aaron, could it have been?"

Not troubling to conceal her eager curiosity, she brushed past her sister with a lack of ceremony that bordered closely on very ill manners, hurled herself nearly out of the window, and proceeded to search the garden narrowly for a phantom lover.

Charlotte, while watching Henrietta warily, still succeeded in appearing quite innocently hurt and offended.

"My dear Nettie, who could be out there? Think for one moment—and don't be so absurd."

"Oh," returned Henrietta, "what's the good of taking that tone with me? I know your tendencies very well, Lotta. Here's your letter," and she tossed it at her sister, who, catching it neatly, remained for a second or so weighing it thoughtfully in her hand.

"Lord, how heavy!" she remarked. "Mother has let herself go. "I bet old Kingsbury has to pay double postage. He'll enjoy doing that."

"Nothing like it—he'll charge it to Mother's account."

In which estimate of his character they did Mr. Kingsbury grave wrong.

"I shouldn't be surprised. I wish I knew what was inside," said Charlotte.

Her sister turned back into the untidy bath-room again, and, skipping over a heap of towels on the floor, observed lightly: "You could steam it."

Charlotte claimed to be horrified at such a suggestion.

"Certainly not," said she in a freezing tone. "And I wonder at you daily, Nettie. You don't seem to own one decent instinct."

"No, I'm quite depraved—I always read post cards," gibed her sister.

"How can you joke about such things? But I suppose it's too much to expect you to behave like a lady."

With that last shot at a perfectly unconcerned Henrietta, she rather grandly left the bath-room, stepping firmly,

and seeking first her bed-room, fished a thin black frock out of the wardrobe. In this confection Charlotte robed herself with solicitous care, and Nettie, lounging in upon her a moment after, was astonished to find that she was also arrayed for her brief stroll in a brightly embroidered Spanish shawl she owned. The gift of Thérèse de la Motte on her last birthday and an object of the most acute, jealous dislike to Clara Manisty. Who could not bear any of her children to receive from outside sources better or more valuable presents than she could afford to give them. As long as she had been able to, she had forbidden their acceptance of such treasure trove. But lately she had been defied on this point by all three. And, for almost the first time in her dealings with her difficult brood, had had to give way.

"You'll find that much too hot," said Nettie.

Charlotte turned on her fiercely.

"Shut up," she cried. "Can I do nothing in this house without advice or criticism from one of you? I am simply sick of it, Henrietta. Go and chase yourself."

And snatching up the letter from the dressing table whereon she had laid it, she took it and herself with extreme rapidity out of the house.

But when, breathing less lightly than usual, she reached the pillar box standing scarlet, squat and uncompromising at the turn of the road, nothing but silence and the white, empty stretch of highway before and behind her greeted her.

For an appreciable space of time Charlotte lingered irresolutely, looking about her. Then sighing a little she thrust the highly scented envelope in the wide mouth of the box and dawdled home.

It would have interested her to know that at that moment the Rectory was all lights and confusion by reason of a large touring car which had arrived at that unconscionable hour, with occupants determined to take away with them a missing Nicolas.

CHAPTER 3

Curiously enough that same post which deposited upon his desk, in his dark, old office in Cornhill, that lengthy and rambling epistle from Clara Manisty, also carried to Jeremiah Kingsbury an important communication from one of his most esteemed foreign clients. Of whom he had a good many.

Madame de Dasulas wrote, in her usual decidedly telegraphic manner, that having made up her mind to eschew the comforts and amenities of her great house in Paris within the next two or three months—and this for a considerable period—she was contemplating the crossing of that narrow stretch of blue water between the Pillars of Hercules, which once marked for mankind the extreme western limits of the world, and still divides completely two entirely opposed civilizations. Once across that narrow channel, she intended, after many years' absence from it, opening her house in Tangier.

In short, time having done its wonted work of healing old wounds and changing distressful situations, and she being elderly and therefore probably more indifferent to the blows of fate, Marie de Dasulas contemplated a retirement to what she was pleased to call the Middle Ages, for a time. And would leave the modern, noisy, rushing world to speed on its senseless way without any help from her.

"Feeling as I do," she wrote, "that what I stand most in need of is a kind of mediæval seclusion—where I can sit and recollect myself. Lately Parisian society and all my young relatives have been too strenuous for me. The fact is I'm not so young as I was."

And she might have added, reflected Jeremiah Kings-

bury, that no longer was her rule unquestioned and her word law in the rambling clan that still looked to her as its head.

Having decided on this change of scene, which she went on to say she was well aware would cause her old friend some astonishment, she would be infinitely obliged if her excellent and valued adviser could find it convenient to undertake a trip across the Channel; and, making her house in that quiet street so close to the still royalistically tinged Boulevard St. Germain, his objective, within its walls be her guest for as many days as pleased him, while she consulted with him over certain matters she had in her mind of grave importance to others as well as to herself.

Fortunately for his peace of mind, Mr. Kingsbury did not wholly grasp then that old and strong willed Marie de Dasulas was about to alter completely most of her testamentary bequests. Though he did gather that in consequence of the sudden and tragic demise of the father of her favorite nephew, the young Sheik Zeid, this young man would have to accept as his portion a life of rule over a vast tract of desert and an early marriage to consolidate his position as the head of a most turbulent set of tribesmen.

"Which he will certainly not care about," murmured Mr. Kingsbury. "But I was always dubious about westernizing the boy so completely. He may be the apple of his followers' eyes, as it were, but now he must suffer unnecessarily. I can't see any way out of it. Well, a great position invariably carries with it a heavy responsibility."

Thus musing over actions taken in the past which he felt were yet in the future to bear bitter fruit, Jeremiah Kingsbury sat at his writing table for some time with the letter spread out before him.

"Yes, Zeid was always her darling—he should have been her son. And would have if she had not been most mistakenly generous at the wrong moment. Mohammed

Abdullah always wanted her. It was not Laure at any time. Well, the boy was much more like her than her treacherous sister. I wonder what he has grown into, for with him, at least, Marie managed to have her own way. While still keeping on terms with Laure."

Jeremiah Kingsbury's smile was dry.

"But she brought the boy up far too English—with his French ancestry so strong in him. It was nonsense educating him at Harrow and then sending him to Trinity, while expecting him to remain a true follower of the Prophet. Still he was keen to go. Over his education he certainly showed all an Oriental's guile. Well, well."

And Mr. Kingsbury chuckled as at some recollection which entertained him greatly.

Dismissing now on a more cheerful note the problem of Madame de Dasulas' affection for her nephew, after a time Mr. Kingsbury pressed a buzzer on his table sharply. Nevertheless, he continued to study the closely written pages before him. There was a hint of something in them which he did not quite understand.

"Let me see—if she wants to see me next week, I might manage it, I should think."

At the entrance of his head clerk he looked up.

"Ascertain what my appointments are for the next ten days," he said, "and see if I can possibly spare three days—three clear days—away from the office. I find I have to go to Paris. I shall fly over and back. That will save time. Madame de Dasulas never bothers about expense. She has quite another rate of mind. And send Miss Pell in to me as soon as possible to take dictation."

He looked directly at his clerk as he finished.

"I hope your rheumatism is better today, Stewart," he said kindly.

"Yes, it is, thank you, sir. I'll see to that at once for you."

The elderly and gaunt figure was about to leave the dingy room when a new thought struck Mr. Kingsbury.

"Wait——"

He picked up Clara Manisty's letter.

"It seems there is some kind of upset at the Pines. Mrs. Manisty is not equal to coping with those headstrong young people of hers. Perhaps I'd better go down there one afternoon this week. Look me out a clear afternoon and a fast train, will you? It is really quicker than going by car."

His clerk gone upon his errands, Mr. Kingsbury fell into a kind of dream again.

A vision of the Pines, that house almost encircled by the fir trees for which it was named, and which his old school-fellow had so laboriously acquired, rose clear and almost menacing before him.

Shaking his head, Jeremiah Kingsbury doubted still the wisdom of the step—taking into consideration the natures of those who dwelt within it.

Bought and furnished out of income entirely, indeed a monument to a steady, driving industry, it had contributed not a little to his friend's ill-health and early death, the lawyer opined shrewdly. But knowing as he had from the first how much secret excitement and longing had moved Charles Manisty to steer a hard, self-denying course over seven long years for it, he had never had the heart to suggest that his friend was not physically strong enough to carry such a burden.

For Charles Manisty, achieving the thing at last, as he felt almost miraculously, thanks to a lucky deal upon the Stock Exchange, had hardly allowed a soul to advise him; or even permitted his surprised wife—to whom her patient, easy-going husband of a furnished London flat now appeared in an entirely different light—to choose or place a chair or table in it.

Under these circumstances the Pines naturally proved a source of distress and a subject of contention from the first.

Over the linen and the china and the kitchen utensils, her husband did allow Clara Manisty a partial choice, bounded by his approval.

But as their tastes in these furnishing matters, as in all others, were diametrically opposed, Charles' ideas running to golden oak, taupe carpets, and blue draperies, wherever a useful shade of golden brown did not flutter in the breeze; and hers being all for Queen Anne chintzes, highly glazed, carpets of a Chinese character and richness of coloring, with all furniture along eighteenth century lines, it was small wonder that the very china disappointed her, and that their views clashed resoundingly. Before long they had reached open and hot disagreement. In the end, Charles Manisty had his own way, and destroyed his wife's affection for him almost completely. After all, as he pointed out, it was his house and he paid the bills. Any argument along these lines could not be controverted. Thenceforth Clara Manisty held her peace, and lived indifferently in a house furnished as she most disliked. It had a real effect upon her health and temper in the end. But that did not trouble her husband—was not even noticed by him—whose eye dwelt daily lovingly on the thing he had himself created. On his blue Delft and his few choice etchings.

That he merely slept there for the most part did not enter his head either. Such a reflection would have seemed to him senseless. He had to sleep somewhere. At least he returned from town each jaded evening to the peace of his pipe and book, and the fresh, aromatic air of Surrey.

But if the house she had to live in was as a constant porous plaster to Mrs. Manisty, at least to her one consolation, and that not by any means an insignificant one, was accorded.

Her Charles was no gardener.

And most fortunately from the first left the garden severely alone.

Therefore concealing from him how much such things really cost, and how month by month she scraped the money out of a meagre household allowance, Clara Manisty gave her whole heart to it and proceeded to fill it full of the flowers she adored.

Roses everywhere and above all, climbers as well as bushes. Nooks and corners filled with pansies and scented clumps of wallflowers which the bees loved. Lupins and hollyhocks standing up tall and straight, and larkspur and clove pinks. Too, in their season, high banks of many-tinted, delicate sweetpea. Which, being plucked, yields always a greater harvest.

Throughout the year there was a triumphant procession. For autumn found her chrysanthemums, ragged edged and huge of bloom, withstanding proudly the fall of the year's colder moods.

And so round to spring again and crocus and violet, daffodil and primrose. Till April set the lilac bushes flowering abundantly.

What tales of honorable and sustained effort, and frenzied finance, too, could her potting shed and small glass house have disclosed. As also that silent, dour old Scot, Alexander Macnab, who worked heart and soul with her, and took as well, though not so tenderly, the Rector's more barren acres in his charge. But both he and Clara Manisty, an able lieutenant, took fierce pride in the prizes their flowers invariably gained at all the local flower shows. Let others show the biggest artichoke and the mammoth vegetable marrow, they banked on their roses and were content to find their wallflowers rated high.

Once, in a giddy hour of fame, they had even gained an honorable mention at the Temple Flower Show, that Mecca of all flower lovers and growers, for an exhibit of the most delicately yellow roses. That was indeed a day of consequence, of notable significance. Though no one in their immediate neighborhood was aware of the judges' epoch-making decision, or would have cared had it penetrated to his obtuse mind. That it was a record both Mrs. Manisty and Alexander meant to duplicate with care and luck, perhaps even beat, went without saying. For neither was out for the applause of those around them,

and they spent little time and less thought on the careless acceptance of their endless labors about what had now become a real garden of design.

Musing on the strange fact that so often men of Charles Manisty's calibre have something of the interior decorator's temperament about them, Jeremiah fell to studying the widow's letter afresh.

It was certainly the oddest circumstance that Charlotte should have been offered a post by Marie de Dasulas, and at this precise moment. Well, the girl could come to no harm in her household, would certainly see something of the world, and relieve her mother of anxiety, for probably a year or two, at least. Madame de Dasulas was kindness itself to young people, no matter what relation theirs might be to her.

His clerk returning to inform him that the next afternoon would certainly be the best for his projected visit to the Manistys, found him still sitting musing over the coincidence.

"Isn't it strange," he said, "that Charlotte Manisty should want to go to France as a companion, and have been suggested to Madame de Dasulas by some friend of hers as *dame de compagnie?* One wonders what made the link between two such widely separated households."

"Very odd indeed."

"But the world is a small place, and daily grows narrower in circumference."

"What with these flying people all over the sky, nowadays, yes indeed, sir. But I think there should be some legislation," returned his clerk solemnly, "they do seem so unnecessarily foolhardy."

Jeremiah Kingsbury got up from his chair and walked over to the window whence he could enjoy a melancholy view of drab roofs and blackened chimney pots.

"But nothing was ever won without the foolhardy, Stewart," he said. "The pioneer must always take almost

insurmountable risks. So that later on the plain man, like you and me, can go about his business more easily and efficiently."

"There's something in that, too," admitted his clerk.

Having uttered this truism, Mr. Kingsbury returned to his table to clip thoughtfully Mrs. Manisty's effusion amongst current business communications.

"That little woman has had a hard time," he said slowly. "Well, I can see no reason why Miss Charlotte should not be very happy with my old friend. With her, she will certainly acquire a wider outlook. You can wire Mrs. Manisty, Stewart, that I will be with her, all being well, after lunch tomorrow."

2.

The receipt of the telegram, however, fluttered the Manisty dovecot considerably.

"What do you suppose that means?" demanded Charlotte of her mother, as she held out at arm's length the flimsy slip of paper embodying the news they had received.

She had that instant returned from an hour's desultory marketing in the village, and a string bag, crammed to bursting with a curiously diverse collection of household necessities her mother had instructed her to bring back, lay inertly on the hall table.

Before answering her daughter's markedly hostile inquiry, Mrs. Manisty put on an elderly straw hat and picked up from the heterogeneous pile of articles on the table a pair of well-worn gardening gloves and a flat basket which contained a small trowel and a pair of large scissors. Armed with these she started to walk slowly down the hall.

"It means what it says, I suppose," she returned indifferently. "Mr. Kingsbury will be here tomorrow after lunch to talk things over."

Charlotte, still standing by the table, eyed the telegram doubtfully and sighed heavily.

"I wish I knew whether he will be for it or against it."

"We shall know that tomorrow," said her mother.

With a sudden irritated movement Charlotte dragged her hat off her head and flung it on the obese string bag, which it crowned rather drunkenly.

"But Mother, I'm going anyway."

Almost at the door Mrs. Manisty turned to regard her daughter steadily, and then came back towards her.

"Hardly without our consent, my dear. Remember you're not of age yet. And there are such things as passports and money to be considered. And judging by the way you usually spend your salary, I think you possess very little ready cash."

This cat-like pouncing on her weakest spot annoyed Charlotte extremely.

"I've got five pounds," she said sulkily.

"Not quite enough, I think. It would not take you far. Well, we shall see what Mr. Kingsbury has to say."

The continual reiteration of the lawyer's name provoked Charlotte so much that, at no time very controlled where she met with opposition, she found herself remarking bitterly, "Yes, you'll be clever enough to put it all on old Jeremiah's shoulders. You'll pretend you can't go against him in any way. Though that's all poppycock. And you won't even listen to what I have to say."

Mrs. Manisty laughed.

"I've been listening to nothing but your point of view, Charlotte, ever since Mademoiselle de la Motte's letter arrived. I must confess it is growing a little tedious. Besides, Paul wasn't so wrong when he reminded you that you were so anxious to get away you wouldn't care what kind of people you went to."

Charlotte flushed hotly under her mother's satirical tone.

"I can't help talking about the only interesting idea I've met with for weeks. Which gives me at least a chance to see a different country and meet some new people. If

you'd only say you'd help me, Mother. But you're so non-committal, it's enough to drive one demented."

"I don't propose to give any hostages to fortune. I've been caught that way before."

"But you don't care how miserable we all are. All you think about is grubbing in your rotten garden, we all know that."

Mrs. Manisty raised her eyebrows.

"Are you intending to be disagreeable, Charlotte?" she asked. "Surely this is hardly the moment to fly off the handle, my dear."

Her voice, Charlotte thought, had an edge on it like steel. But having by this time thoroughly lost her temper, she was past caring how much she affronted her unaccommodating parent.

"Well, it's true," she stormed resentfully.

"And if it were——"

"We're all sick and tired of hearing of the garden and nothing but the garden all the year round."

"And yet," returned Mrs. Manisty, "if you think twice, you will find I do not, and never have, let it interfere with your interests in any way."

"It just takes up all your spare time, though."

"And why not?" demanded her mother. "I have few enough interests, Heaven knows. Can't afford most recreations a woman of my age expects to enjoy. The fact is all you children are insufferably self-centered. Besides, flowers are not by a long sight so troublesome as you have always been."

This slap in the face exasperated Charlotte freshly.

"I hate everything and everybody," she declared passionately. "Why should I have been born poor? I'm sure I didn't ask to come into the world."

"Yes, you chose your parents very badly," retorted her mother, "for a girl of your nature. It was inexcusably careless. But since you are here, I wish you'd try sometimes to remember that though you've had the luck—if

luck it is—to be a product of this remarkable twentieth century, before which nobody seems to have been anything but a plain fool, you yet have to learn to think."

"To think!" repeated Charlotte blankly.

"Yes, to think. That's what so few of you wonderfully endowed young people ever do. All you indulge in at present is theory about life and about everything else. No old, already trodden paths for you. But you'll have to learn to live yet. Meanwhile I shall continue gardening."

"Yes, and where will it get us?" asked Charlotte. "It doesn't make any money. Vegetables might. We're just in a backwater here."

"Exactly. 'A book of verses underneath the bough.'"

"Well, I haven't even got the 'thou,'" pointed out Charlotte. "What chance have I of getting married in these parts?"

"Oh, you'll get married," her mother's tone was quite final.

"Or doing anything worth while?" continued Charlotte crossly, deciding to take no notice of her mother's challenge. "And now when I get an opportunity to try my wings a little, you hide behind old Kingsbury, an old dried-up bachelor, if there ever was one."

"He's your guardian. Your father made him that, I didn't."

Still driven on by her forebodings and her anxieties, in spite of her mother's cold attitude, Charlotte ventured her last appeal.

"At least don't let him overrule you. If he is against my going to France, fight him, won't you please, Mother?"

"And now we're just where we were when we started this conversation, my dear," her mother took her up amusedly. Then she turned, and resuming her leisurely progress to the garden door at the other end of the hall, dismissed Charlotte and her woes together. On its threshold, however, she paused just long enough to add coolly, "There was really no need to become so impassioned, my dear. I

am not against the scheme. And Mr. Kingsbury may be quite favorable to the idea. We can only wait and see."

Leaving her daughter with this meagre crumb of hope to sustain her, she departed, smiling to herself.

It was really remarkable, she reflected, how Charlotte, from her babyhood, had formed the habit of crying so loudly for the apple she supposed to be out of her reach on the tree. It never seemed to occur to her there might be other specimens of fruit in the orchard equally delectable. Well, it would do the child no harm to fear she was not going to attain her wish so easily. For a few hours, at least. But as she weeded her flower beds industriously, and clipped her rose bushes with science, Clara Manisty was already cogitating upon ways and means. Charlotte would certainly go to this French lady, if she had anything to do with it. The experience might make a sensible being of her. And she must have some new clothes and a trunk—that was certain. But how to get them for her and not rob her beloved flowers too much. That was also a question. Finally she supposed those improvements in the green-house would have to stand down. And the old lawn mower would have to do duty for another year.

"Poverty, poverty, poverty," sighed Clara Manisty. "Is there anything in the world more circumscribing? If only girls could guess when they married a poor man for love, what it really meant in after years!"

Charlotte, walking with Nettie to the Rectory after lunch to play tennis, was still the morose prey to a deep despondency. Therefore, feeling that she needed all the reassurance she could get, she plagued her sister with a fresh recital of all her hopes and fears.

Nettie took it all very calmly.

"Don't you worry," she advised her. "I'll bet you go. In her heart Mother looks on this as a godsend. Don't you know by now, Lotta, she wants the house to herself?"

"She can have it as far as I'm concerned."

Nettie giggled.

"And I shall go when I get ready, too. She'll be only too glad to get rid of us. I believe she's thinking of marrying again."

This startling announcement had the effect of stopping Charlotte dead in the middle of the path.

"No!" she cried. "Who is it?"

Nettie continued to laugh for some moments, and then began to whistle.

"I don't know yet," she admitted at last carelessly. "Although I have an idea. But I've seen signs and symptoms lately. Oh, yes, I have a feeling in my bones."

"Oh, if that's all!"

Charlotte dismissed the suggestion scornfully.

They were at the moment about to cross the village green, which, running extensively along the latter end of the High Street, was enclosed on two sides by old-fashioned houses, hiding coyly in walled gardens, and was dominated on its fourth side by the Rectory and the church within its quiet churchyard.

"Look!" said Nettie, changing the subject with great violence, and she stared across the grassy space curiously. "Look, there he goes!"

"Who?" asked Charlotte. "I do wish you'd use a noun now and then in your chat. It would make things clearer at times."

"Oh, well, that Nicolas person."

In her turn Charlotte halted to stare eagerly across the grass to where a tall figure swung briskly away from them across its uneven surfaces.

"There he goes, just by Dobson's cow," said Nettie.

Charlotte's glance followed her sister's pointing finger wistfully.

The young man was disappearing at a great rate.

His left arm appeared to be still in a sling, and under his straw hat his head was still bandaged.

"Now I wonder if that was why——" she murmured.

"Yes, that's him," continued Nettie, as regardless of

grammar as the monkish avowers of that ill-fated mediæval jackdaw. "What are you muttering to yourself, Lotta?"

"Nothing."

"Fancy him being allowed out. He must have got round Kirsty at last."

"Then he's clever," said Charlotte. "There he goes into the postoffice. Let's hope he gives us a chance to look him over while we're playing tennis. I must say I should like to hear him speak," she continued frankly.

Nettie opened her eyes widely, denoting cloudy great surprise.

"Hear him speak," she repeated. "What's the matter with his voice?"

"Nothing that I know of."

"Then why do you so particularly want to hear him speak? It was his arm he broke."

Charlotte looked at her sister's puzzled face and began to laugh.

"Yes. I can see that," she returned.

"But why do you want to hear him speak so specially?" Nettie repeated suspiciously. "Lotta, you've been up to something. Yes, you look quite guilty."

Charlotte caught Henrietta by the arm.

"I do not," she returned firmly. "Just stop being imaginative for once. And come on. We can't stand here all day stuck like two army mules in a bog. I'm sure you'd love to know what I meant just now, but you won't. That's my little secret."

Scornfully Henrietta studied the blank face of her unpassive relative.

"Oh, you'll tell me in the end," she retorted tartly. "Or I shall find out for myself."

"That you certainly won't."

She gave her sister another quick but searching scrutiny.

"Yes. I shall. Your cats are always fairly bursting out of their bags."

Irritatingly and derisively Charlotte laughed at her again.

"Well, cat or no cat, come along now," she urged impatiently, "or we shall be late. And then Mrs. Adams will try to be witty at our expense. She always fails so dismally, I end by getting quite sorry for her."

"It must be terrible to be so little minded."

"Only she doesn't know that. She imagines herself to be a very Solomon for wisdom and breadth of view."

With a concluding inquisitorial stare in the direction of the postoffice, which seemed to have swallowed Kirsty's patient for some considerable time, Nettie allowed herself to be dragged away from her moorings under the elms to accomplish the remaining distance to the Rectory.

"Though why we can't wait and see if he's coming our way I can't understand," she complained. "We could introduce ourselves then."

"We could not." Charlotte began to walk the faster, and spoke the more severely because that identical notion had crossed her mind a second earlier, only to be immediately abandoned as decidedly wanting in subtlety. If she was destined to meet again this shallow, indiscreet and heedless person—more than likely some absurd and impossible foreign vagabond—she would. Somehow she felt certain of that. Let him retreat into all the postoffices in England to avoid her, for she felt certain he had seen her advancing towards the Rectory, he must emerge at last to encounter an already curiously attracted Charlotte, would she or no.

"Come along, you little idiot," she therefore remarked sharply to her younger sister, "what ridiculous ideas you do get."

Nettie, however, utterly refused to consider her suggestion a foolish one. Unconventional it might be, she was ready to admit that, but not to be despised on that account, either.

"The fact is, you have no initiative, Charlotte," she said

lefully. "Now I like to make things come my way. All the same I bet Kirsty's mad at his trotting off on his own like that."

"It's amazing she isn't with him holding his hand," replied Charlotte frigidly.

"She's had plenty of time to do that these past ten days."

"Nettie!"

"Probably as an occupation it's beginning to pall now."

But when Miss Mainsty encountered Miss McLeod a short time after, there was no kind of frost in her manner. Rather did it betray a soft and polite carnivorous, as of the cat who has recently surreptitiously enjoyed a whole bowl of the richest cream.

Kirsty as usual was genial and seemingly perfectly carefree.

"Hello, Kirsty, how's the one and only patient?"

Nettie's stentorianly bluff greeting reverberated from one end of the Rectory grounds to the other.

"I believe we saw him crossing the green just now."

Kirsty, playing an indolent practice game with Winthrop Simpson, Miss Ethel's stently good-natured younger brother, before the rest of the afternoon's guests put in an appearance, winged a well placed ball across the net before she replied, "I shouldn't wonder. He's quite out of my hands now."

"His people turned up for him in the dead of night, didn't they?" asked Winthrop, returning her service neatly.

"In the dead of night? How exciting!" cried Nettie, instantly all ears.

"The Rector didn't find it so."

"And when did this happen?" demanded Nettie.

"A couple of nights ago, wasn't it, Winthrop? And he leaves us tomorrow," said Kirsty. "They wanted to take him away then and there."

"Only the chap had gone out for a long nocturnal ramble and left no address," said Winthrop with a grin. "And they couldn't or wouldn't wait then."

"Aunt May wasn't particularly cordial. We were all pretty stuffy, I think," admitted Kirsty. "But how could we know he'd take it into his ridiculous head to shin down the water pipe with a broken arm? I tucked him up safely enough in bed around ten o'clock. I wish now I'd fastened him down."

"With safety pins," gurgled Nettie. "Where did he go?"

Kirsty laughed.

"Ah, that's what we should all like to know," she answered carelessly. "Only when he came home to a wild scene of criticism and astonished displeasure, he beat us all by just going dumb. He didn't even tell us what was in the letter they left for him—then."

"So he's going tomorrow," said Charlotte thoughtfully.

"I call that a shame, just when he might be some use to the community," grumbled the incorrigible Henrietta, swinging her racket with great violence and partnering without the slightest notice Kirsty's amazed opponent.

"Upon my word!' said Winthrop.

"It's only a practice game—so why excite yourself, Winthrop? After all, I'm coming to your help."

Without any further warning she forthwith lobbed a tricky one over the net, which Miss McLeod, on the lookout for just such tactics, knowing her Henrietta of old, was fortunately ready for.

"Prepare to receive cavalry," she shouted in a tremendous voice. "The battle is on."

"How's the singing coming along?" inquired Winthrop Simpson, as he passed his new ally to take a swiftly coming ball.

"Perfectly grand," roared Nettie complacently, "I can sing deep down, and deeper every day—almost in the bowels of the earth."

"You'll make a fortune yet as a freak," said Winthrop.

Perceiving that she was now being unmistakably outfought and out-generaled, Kirsty appealed to the as yet idly watching Charlotte.

"You help me, Lotta. I'm all of a dither. I can't possibly beat these bandits unaided. All the same that's vantage, Henrietta, my lamb."

Charlotte now flung herself actively into the mêlée, and they were all four so absorbed in chasing an ever more elusive, definitive victory that none of them remarked the sauntering arrival of the young man they had been so carelessly discussing.

When Nicolas Vaurien turned the corner of the house and came slowly towards the tennis players, so intent were they all on their rapidly varying fortunes that he stood in the shadow of an old chestnut tree, watching the quartette of leaping, running figures for some time, completely unobserved.

Perhaps on the whole his eyes rested longer on Charlotte's lightly moving figure than on any one else, but it was the erratic Henrietta's war cries which in the end made him laugh heartily.

It was really the advent of Mrs. Adams, surrounded by a dozen or so of new arrivals, which forced him to abandon the rôle of spectator for the time being at any rate.

Peremptorily she called to him, and obediently he became engulfed thereafter in an ocean of introductions and small talk, exclamations and inquiries.

The game, too, broken up by the relentless Mrs. Adams, Winthrop Simpson was the first to draw Charlotte's attention to him, though he spoke to Kirsty.

"Hello," he said in a low tone, as he retrieved a stray ball and handed it to her on his racket over the net, "there's your enigmatic patient at last, behaving like an ordinary human being. He's actually conversing amiably with a pretty girl."

Charlotte shot a look at the group he indicated.

"He ought to be lying down," said Kirsty, "with the long journey he's got in front of him."

Nettie stopped winding up the tennis net long enough to demand, "What journey?" But she was destined to re-

ceive no satisfactory reply, for at that precise moment Mrs. Adams, in blue foulard, with a large pattern of cabbage roses enriching it, bore down on them purposefully. In the tones that an inspired prophetess might have used she announced that they must all toss for partners at once.

"That is, if you want to get any real play before tea." She turned more directly to her husband's niece and Winthrop Simpson.

"Here are Cynthia West, and George Painter, who's just come down from town, and little Lucy Watson, all dying to play. We, at home, must not be selfish, Christina."

A lanky young man, followed by a more sturdily built but boyish appearing damsel, thereupon detached himself thankfully from the larger group about Mrs. Adams. Nicolas Vaurien, who somehow gave the effect of a small tug in the wake of a gigantic liner, now managed to efface himself rather cleverly.

"I hope I play with Charlotte," remarked George Painter firmly.

Nettie, who knew how little her sister appreciated his open partiality for her company, took upon herself to bar his way with an uncompromising racket.

"You heard what Mrs. Adams said—we are to toss for partners, George."

"Oh, damn!" said he.

"Try not to be unreasonable," advised Nettie, and threw her racket in the air. "Rough side you play with Charlotte, smooth you take Cynthia."

"But I don't want to take Cynthia," he muttered. However, the racket came down on the smooth side.

Thus, a self-constituted and resolute selection committee of one, Henrietta Manisty, as she so often did, slipped without much real opposition into the position of general director and umpire. There were those present certainly, like George Painter, who considered she took far too much on herself, but as they remained for one reason or another inarticulate, their criticism did not affect her at all. While

the unfortunate George was far too enraged at the inauspicious start of his holiday to do more than glare savagely at the too officious Nettie whenever she addressed him. So that finally, to fill his bitter cup to overflowing, she asked him if he had gone dumb for any reason.

"Not that we mind, George. We think it's an improvement on the whole. Now, you are one of those strong, silent men. But you might nod or shake your head to indicate comprehension."

His muttered "Oh hell!" filled her with a wicked glee.

Meanwhile Charlotte Manisty had slipped away from the lookers-on, who now sat two deep along the sides of the tennis court.

Why she should be bothered by George Painter, of all young men, she could not understand. He was perhaps of all her admirers the one she most disliked. At no time had she had any use for conceited young apes who earned a precarious living by dabbling in the minor arts of journalism and short story writing, she told herself. That kind of cheap, popular stuff, so glib and shallow, she really could not abide. And how often had she informed George of this, only to have him urge upon her notice yet more ephemeral and destructive copy of which he had been guilty. But when, added to the stark disability of a microscopic income, these young bloods of the day imagined they had only to offer her carelessly the half of a very hard bed and an almost vegetarian board in exchange for all that she might have to offer, and moreover expected an enthusiastic acceptance of the same, then Charlotte found herself more affronted than she liked to own. Fearing herself to be old-fashioned at such sentimental reactions to an up-to-date style of wooing.

Meditating upon this and other perplexing traits in her character, but known as she hoped only to herself, Charlotte wandered away from the madding crowd of three dozen souls congregated about the tennis court, and retiring to a rustic summer house at the very end of the flower garden—

hidden from the rest of the world by a conveniently high hedge of green box—sank upon a wooden seat and assumed an attitude of distinctly watchful waiting.

At the end of another five minutes, Nicolas Vaurien, battered and smiling, stood in the doorway.

"I couldn't get away before. How they talk, these ladies about here. Mightn't we consider ourselves as introduced?" he asked airily.

For a moment or two Charlotte regarded him without speaking. Then she said, "After the other night—I wonder."

But this undecided and chilly reception certainly did not discourage him if she had intended it to, for he came in promptly and sat down beside her.

"Rapunzel," he said earnestly, "I don't believe you're an ordinary mortal at all."

"Why not?"

"You're certainly too cold and aloof for these modern days. You'll never get on. You must be a relation of that Snow Queen who popped an ice splinter into the heart of little Gerda's sweetheart for her own amusement."

"You seem to know nothing but fairy tales," commented Charlotte.

"They seem to fit you," he retorted. "Besides I consider them much better reading than most of the youthful voyages of discovery in the ancient realm of sex thrown at our heads today."

"You're young yourself," pointed out Charlotte.

He laughed.

"Many thanks for reminding me. So I am. But you haven't answered my question."

"About being introduced properly by Mrs. Adams?"

"Yes."

"Oh, well——"

Taking her rather doubtfully voiced and unfinished phrase to indicate permission to waive any further ceremony, he settled himself more comfortably in the seat be-

side her, and offered her a cigarette out of an expensive looking case.

"Will you smoke?" he asked hospitably.

Charlotte took a cigarette and thanked him. Whereupon he withdrew one for his own use, thrust the case back in his pocket and produced a shining, patent lighter of the latest manufacture.

"One of these things that never go off when you expect them," said Charlotte, eying the affair doubtfully.

"It goes off, as you call it, sometimes," he rejoined cheerfully. "This is to be one of the occasions."

He was so dextrous with his one, whole arm that Charlotte could not help remarking upon it.

"One lives and learns. It's amazing what one can do without if one has to. Though I hope this is only a temporary inconvenience. But after all, Allah be thanked, it was my left arm that fool of a woman smashed."

"Badly?"

"A compound fracture, and naturally at the most inconvenient moment."

For the first time Charlotte allowed herself to smile upon him.

"I'm so sorry. It was hard luck, and now you're going away tomorrow."

"Yes," he answered slowly, "tomorrow."

After a moment he added, more to himself than to her, it seemed, "But one always has today."

Not knowing quite what to make of this ambiguous sentence, Charlotte remained silent. Suddenly he laughed again.

"Do you perhaps speak some other language more easily than English, Rapunzel?" he asked.

Charlotte looked a round eyed astonishment.

"More easily—what do you mean?"

"What I said. It's quite simple. The English tongue, enriched from Chaucer to these days and warranted to

express any shade of meaning, seems to come a little haltingly. There is no flow, if I may put it that way. Perhaps French would suit you better?"

Inimically Charlotte eyed him. "I suppose you think you're frightfully smart," she suggested.

"Not smart," he corrected. "Bright. Yes, I'm proud to say mine has always been an active mind."

"Then you'll find yourself very out of place here."

"But I'm not making a long stay."

Charlotte, at the thought that he was a bird of passage beginning now to accord him a melancholy attention, told him gravely she considered him to be singularly fortunate.

"To be leaving these parts? There—now—I don't altogether agree with you, Rapunzel." But the compliment, if he intended it as such, passed harmlessly over her head; Charlotte's mind being quite on other things.

"Well, I wish I was," she cried impatiently. "I should be too happy."

"Wouldn't it depend a little on your destination? One takes oneself with one, wherever one goes."

"I should like to be going anywhere."

Charlotte said this so firmly that he began to laugh again.

"Then what a pity it is you can't come with me," he remarked in so compassionate a tone that she had to laugh too.

"But where are you going?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

Charlotte considered.

"It's perfectly ridiculous to say girls can't keep secrets," she replied with a return of frost about her.

"All the girls in the world can chatter as far as I'm concerned," he told her grandly, "but I asked you if you could hold your tongue?"

He stressed the second "you" so strongly and stared at her so pointedly that rather to her surprise Charlotte found herself confessing almost too truthfully that she didn't

really know. Then she became fearfully annoyed with herself for being so weak. What business was it of his?

"At least that's honest," he said thoughtfully. "However, probably you've never had a real secret to keep. Today it is the fashion to tell all and make thereby as much mischief as one can. That is called being sincere." He gave her a quick look. "I don't believe I'll risk it."

Charlotte looked hurt.

"Why? Could it matter so much?"

"That is not the point. To my mind it would not be honorable if you let it out—having given your word. As a matter of fact, if I were to tell you where I am going and what I was going to do, and it filtered out, it might easily mean that in the end I should be disinherited. On the other hand, you might say I have no right to burden you with such a confidence."

"I should hate you to be disinherited through me." At that he gave her a very friendly look.

"But we'd better talk about something else," he said.

3.

However their tête-à-tête, productive up to this moment of nothing but a curious feeling of irritation as far as Charlotte was concerned, was now interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Miss Ethel Simpson, who had got tired of watching the others play tennis and not using a very marked gift for conversation.

Like a bird, she hovered in the entrance of their retreat.

"Oh," said she, her eyes resting glitteringly on the young man sitting beside Charlotte, "I do hope I'm not stopping a confidential chat of any kind."

"Not at all," said Nicolas Vaurien, getting to his feet, "the town crier might have repeated every word up to now."

Miss Simpson thereupon sank on the vacated seat.

Charlotte exchanged a look with Nicolas, which, being interpreted, said, "She means business."

Miss Simpson turned to Charlotte.

"What is this rumor I hear about your going to France?" she began briskly. "Your mother has just arrived, as usual very late, and I heard her telling Mrs. Adams that it was more than likely we should lose you for a year at least."

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"Nothing's settled, Miss Ethel," she returned glumly, far from overjoyed at having to tolerate a discussion of her private affairs before a perfect stranger. And that after having so recently spoken as she had on the subject of travel generally. Never dreaming that precisely this dubious situation could arise, she had led him to believe that a voyage toward any new horizon would have equally pleased her and been equally beyond the range of practical politics for her. And now there had arisen this sudden, unqualified suggestion that Paris was her almost immediate destination.

She could, she felt, never bring herself to explain to him that curious feeling of superstitious fear which had invaded her and made her feel that if she spoke to him of her chances of leaving her home out loud those possibilities would be instantly destroyed.

Bus Miss Simpson was, probably quite unwittingly, decidedly making her look something of a prevaricator; a disingenuous juggler with words. And what would this sternly meticulous foreign creature think of her? That he might admire her for her reticence did not occur to Charlotte, who felt the whole incident to be too annoying, and found herself for some reason she could not fathom very loath to fall in his estimation. Already she hugged to herself a delicious sense of exaltation whenever he addressed her as Rapunzel; and an even greater thrill had surged through her when he had accused her of being as remote as that absurd Snow Queen of some ridiculously old-fashioned fairy tale. Never before in her life had a man caused her heart to miss a beat.

But she was sure that long explanations never made initial blunders any better, and she supposed now quite bitterly that she had far better have left the subject of over-seas journeying severely alone.

It was all this jumble of unquiet thinking which made her say sulkily: "It's more than possible Mr. Kingsbury will put his veto on the idea of my going to Madame de Dasulas."

The mention of this name instantly rendered Miss Ethel archly and over-zealously solicitous.

"Why, what a picturesque name," she cooed; "but I do hope, dear Charlotte, that she is quite elderly and very responsible."

Charlotte turned the idea moodily over in her mind.

"I know very little about her," she said finally. "She's got nieces, I know, and a courier of her own for travelling. She's probably about your own age, Miss Ethel," she added bluntly.

Then, filled with a fierce resentment at the unkind trick fate seemed to be playing on her, she hurried on.

"I only wish Mother would wait a bit before she acted as if the thing were really settled."

Yet, if she had been cool-headed enough to stop and reflect, she might have remembered that her mother rarely made public items of news regarding herself, or her family, unless they were already more or less solid facts, and have taken some comfort from the knowledge.

But now she complained: "I shall look such a fool if I don't go after all. Which is more than likely."

Miss Simpson, however, a little flushed and certainly bridling at the very uncalled for reference to her own age, indulged in so tactlessly by Charlotte, refused to take her hint and change the subject. Instead she turned deliberately to the silent person standing aloofly before them both, to observe: "I always contend travel is so good for us all. My father has been, in his time, quite a wanderer, and I always tell him it has made him the polished, broad

minded gentleman he is today, Mr. Vaurien. What do you think about it?"

"Not having the pleasure of your father's acquaintance, Miss Simpson, I am hardly in a position to judge. But travel is undoubtedly excellent," said he.

Miss Simpson flung her line into the pool once more.

"I suppose you've been a great traveller, too. Most foreigners are, I've always understood. They always seem to be moving about. But they have no home life, have they? I always think that's so sad; and very bad for the poor little children."

He regarded her mournfully.

"The Jews are the only people who have a home life today," he declared gloomily. "The rest of the world preferring violent games and motoring."

He made this surprising announcement in so sepulchral a tone that Miss Simpson, quite taken aback by the strangeness of the information thus thrown at her, could only manage a blank and feeble "Oh!" For the moment the introduction of the Children of Israel into the conversation completely nonplussed her. She even had an odd feeling that it was not quite decent. Only that was absurd, of course.

Further chat momentarily hanging fire, Charlotte, who was now fast becoming absolutely despairing of any rescue, and sure that Miss Simpson intended to bless them with her company indefinitely, began to look wildly about her for some means whereby that lady might be removed from their immediate neighborhood. Short of murder, she felt ready for any measure. But alas, in all the garden about them, behind their high hedge of green, nothing stirred in the hot afternoon except a few bees intent on their ancient honey-getting business, and one small, inquisitive squirrel, watching them from the middle distance with bright eyes and bound in the long run for the highest branch of the nearest tree.

Meanwhile, while Charlotte's attention had been straying

afield, the only daughter of the Lord of the Manor, having acquired her second wind, had deployed her conversational forces on another objective.

She was saying:

"I was so delighted to hear you were so much better."

Gushingly, to Charlotte's barely concealed disgust, she underlined almost every second word.

"Mrs. Burchell was telling me only yesterday how pleased the doctor was with the way your arm is mending."

"Yes, it's doing splendidly," murmured Nicolas, and remained staring down at his boots as if he wished either her or himself anywhere but there.

But upon Miss Simpson his attitude made not the least impression. She belonged, as Charlotte could have told him, to that large class of females in the world who, being born obstinately and anæmically virginal, are endowed in recompense with a greater amount of obtuseness than the rest of their sex; and are therefore much too self-centered to notice the reactions of those about them. Their minds being single-tracked indeed.

Therefore, having at last cornered the Adams' mysterious and enigmatical boarder, she was bent on treating him now as a kind of conundrum or charade, to be guessed by means of a series of leading questions.

Genially, as she would have described her gesture, she turned to him again.

"Ah," she continued with a studied artlessness she found quite pastoral, "you must be so glad to be allowed amongst us all again. There is no loneliness like that of the sick room, I fancy."

"Except being a convict," put in Charlotte acidly.

"But don't they all go out walking chained together? However, that cannot interest us at the moment, dear Charlotte. I was merely remarking on loneliness generally, and en passant."

Sweetly she turned back to the immobile and statue-like Nicolas.

"I think being shut away in one room is almost the worst part of illness. One misses so much of the daily happenings. Nobody remembers that one still likes to hear the current news of the day."

"Don't you mean gossip?" interrupted Charlotte rudely.

Miss Simpson gave her a look.

"But you forget I had a wonderful nurse," Nicolas hastily reminded Miss Ethel.

"Oh, yes, a nurse. But dear Kirsty is always so strict."

Nicolas nodded.

"I cannot deny that," he admitted.

Miss Simpson resumed.

"She never lets any one talk of her patients, and she won't say a word about them—or anyone else for the matter of that."

"Clearly a pearl amongst women."

Miss Simpson, the ardent suffragist but lightly sleeping within her, took him up quickly.

"Do you mean to imply that as a sex we gossip more than yours does?"

"That's a very delicate question," said he. "How about temperament?"

"It may be a delicate question for you, perhaps, but not for me, young man. When it's well known that half the scandals in London start in the men's clubs. Hotbeds of vicious newsmongering and tittle-tattle, I call them."

Composedly he bore her wrathful glance.

"In my club nobody ever seems to utter a word to a soul. So it must be all done by signs," he remarked reflectively. "But then we possess two bishops and at least three deans amongst our members. Yes, a couple of historians, too, and one big game shooter who never seems to be there. So perhaps that may account for it."

"Account for what?"

"Our state of grace in the matter of babbling hearsay to each other. The only person I ever address, I assure you, is my waiter. He knows a lot about food."

"So he ought to," said Charlotte, "if he's a waiter."

"Not at all," he retorted, "being born in a ship doesn't necessarily make you a sea captain. There are waiters and waiters. Would you ask a fellow in Lyons', for instance, for a well-thought-out menu for dinner?"

"They're all girls there," said Miss Ethel triumphantly, "and we don't dwell so much on our food."

"So they are," said he, "now I come to think of it. Well, I don't patronize women's eating houses myself very often. It's well known few women know how to cook or choose a decent meal. Except the French," he added. "And your taste, dear ladies, in dress is usually absurd. Right from crinolines to the present chemises you affect."

This smashing attack so incensed Miss Simpson that she was rendered temporarily quite speechless, and before she could effectively pull herself together again Charlotte completed her state of ferment and fluster by remarking easily, "Why, there goes Winthrop, with Cynthia, looking very attentive. I suppose we shall have to congratulate them soon."

Apprehensively Miss Ethel stared in the direction wherein Charlotte appeared to be pensively gazing.

"Dear me, I hope not," she said uncompromisingly. "It would be a most unsuitable match."

With a hasty, inarticulate word or two, quite forgetting that she had as yet omitted to launch those half-dozen leading questions, she had promised Mrs. Adams to get answered, at the head of the impertinent stranger within their gates, she hurried down the path in the direction she supposed her brother to have taken. Although she had but perceived him and his companion with the inward eye of fear.

"Which way did you say they went? Never mind, I can find them." And so, talking to the last, she disappeared around a corner at top speed.

"That settles her," said Nicolas, immediately re-seating himself beside Charlotte. "I suppose you have employed

these methods successfully in the past, in moments of crisis. There was a finished touch about the way you got her shunted. But I also suppose there is no truth in the rumor you spread just then."

"I hope you don't think me double-faced," replied Charlotte. "But you could see for yourself I had to do something. And Winthrop can take care of himself. I don't believe Cynthia would look at him. It's Lucy Watson who really likes him. But what I wanted to explain was about France—you know, what she said just now. I am honestly very doubtful of being allowed to accept the opportunity."

Nicolas smiled at her.

"I know just how you feel," he returned amiably. "I wonder how you would like Paris. It is a lovely city, full of charm."

But he saw no reason to inform her that Madame de Dasulas happened to be his aunt.

"I expect I should love it," said Charlotte, wistfully. And being in a softer mood, presently he managed to get out of her a very complete account of the whole affair, its scope and possibilities, before their solitude was again invaded. This time by Henrietta, with the information that every one had gone in to tea, and Mrs. Adams commanded their presence at her dining-room table at once.

"Your two chairs look so empty," said Nettie.

"Are they together?"

Henrietta gave him one of her sharp looks. The kind that Paul always characterized as gimlet.

"At opposite ends of the table," she told him.

"Oh," murmured Charlotte, "I do hope I'm not next to George Painter."

Much later in the evening, as he sat on the side of his bed in his pajamas, smoking a final clandestine cigarette, and meditating on the strange turn of events which might yet send this girl he was already in love with to be a member of his aunt's household, he asked himself if he had not better avoid the house in the Rue de Bellechasse

religiously as soon as he knew her to be arrived within its pleasant walls. For something told him already that coming there, she must violently disturb his peace of mind. And he was well aware he could afford no infatuation. That would be to ruin his whole future, probably. Besides, brought up as he had been, the men of his house must always subordinate their private inclinations to a public duty. Not that they had entirely done so in the past, he admitted. Or had they? He began to think of his father for the first time for weeks. Well, it would be too absurd to find himself the victim of a passion which might destroy him, now that things had changed for him over night. Perhaps even make him willing to sacrifice his liberty and his future for a lovely, foolish child without a soul.

"For these western women are all alike," he mused. "Executive and bustling, and ready to wear breeches or slap one on the back *en camarade*. What do they know of love? They are like continual grit in the teeth."

CHAPTER 4

In spite of all gnawing fears to the contrary, Charlotte found herself one morning early in September about to eat her final breakfast at home; prior to setting forth on her excursion into foreign soils far beyond her earlier horizons.

The day was a sunny, cheerful and windless one, with a smooth blue mass of sky overhead. Which she felt to be a good omen, as she looked out of her bedroom window over the familiar prospect of lawn and fir tree so soon to be left behind for more exotic scenes and all those vivid new experiences which she hoped must assuredly befall her in the months to come.

Thérèse de la Motte's words came suddenly back to her. "You may have been born under a romantic star, Charlotte, and everything you do may turn out interesting."

From the bottom of her heart Charlotte earnestly prayed that this might be the case; and, looking around the room to see that she had left nothing belonging to her unpacked, went thoughtfully downstairs.

Her modest baggage, consisting of one small flat trunk, but filled with new frocks and underwear chosen by herself, a good sized suit-case for more immediate use, and a neat hat-box packed with three new hats—the fourth was on her head—was already locked securely and assembled in the hall. Somewhere upon each shiningly glazed, brown piece there was an impressive C. M. in red block letters. A source of unconcealed satisfaction to her; who had, up to that date, like the early Christians, possessed all things in common with the rest of her family, and most certainly those objects relating to travel.

Her umbrella, blue travelling coat with a gray fur neck-

piece, gloves, and a perfectly new, embossed scarlet leather handbag, containing her money—not too much of this—passport, and tickets for trains and boat all carefully arranged within, as well as a brand new powder puff in an embroidered silken envelope, were laid on a chair there also, as she entered the dining-room, for once in her life upon the stroke of eight.

She found herself to be a prey to an excited mood of anticipation, but very slightly alloyed by an odd sensation, at moments, of remorse that she should be feeling the actual leaving of her home circle so little. Almost guiltily she suspected that she should be inclined to tears at the very least, and certainly have no appetite for her food, when in point of fact she felt particularly stimulated and unusually hungry this morning.

"Well," began Nettie, looking their intrepid voyager critically over, "she doesn't look too bad. That's a very well made frock, and blue suits her. Which well she knows. And today's the day."

"Yes," commented Paul, still far from enthusiastic about this experiment to which Charlotte now stood committed, "the girl is going to develop into a perfect globe-trotter, when every one knows woman's proper place to be the home."

Nettie giggled.

"You heard Sir Frederick Simpson say that—the funny old fish. But it's quite exploded now."

"Not amongst the old guard," responded Paul, "of whom there are many in this countryside," and finished with a long, cool stare at his elder sister, "let us hope the jade will never regret it."

About to pull her chair out from the table and seat herself in it, Charlotte paused long enough to endow the impertinent Paul with a smart clip over the ear.

"That's right, spoil my last meal," she cried resentfully. "I can't endure your cheeky ways. Stop croaking, for mercy's sake!"

"Or you'll burst into tears," he retorted grinning, and rubbing his ear. But, as he had attained his object of annoying her, bearing her no malice for the blow.

"After all, she can always come home again," pointed out Mrs. Manisty, who, at the head of the table, was already starting to pour out tea for every one.

"Perhaps she won't want to," suggested Nettie, after a moment. "Pass the toast, Paul, and don't keep the boiled eggs entirely to yourself. In any case, you can't eat four at once."

Paul pushed the egg-rack towards her, remarking at the same time, "Yes, I could, if I broke them all into a glass."

"Dashed greedy," said Nettie.

"But pleasant," returned her brother, "particularly with lots of salt and pepper."

Mrs. Manisty had meanwhile been cogitating on her younger daughter's insinuation.

"Why, Nettie!" she reproved her. "What an idea! Not want to come home again! One would think Charlotte to be quite unfeeling."

"Rapunzel—how cold you are!"

In Charlotte's ears the tones of that coolly ingratiating voice lingered.

She found herself, to her annoyance, suddenly blushing.

"So she is, aren't you, Lotta?"

Thus personally appealed to by an aggressive Nettie, Charlotte managed to look very pained, and profess herself with some eloquence unable to understand by what cerebral processes Henrietta had arrived at such a cold-blooded conclusion.

"That was easy enough," retorted her sister. "Well—have a kipper and forget it."

"Besides how should she know?" asked Paul in his most don-like manner. "The girl's never been in love."

In undisguised amazement Charlotte demanded how he could possibly know, while his mother exclaimed, "Why,

Paul!" in the most shocked of voices, adding that boys of his age could understand nothing of such subjects.

Paul raised his eyebrows.

"With all this sex-appeal business about?" he inquired. "You're far behind the times, Mother. Also the subject of love," he continued grandly, and in the rhetorical manner of one addressing a public meeting, "happens to interest me. I've been reading recently one of those psycho-what's-his-name Johnnies. Charlotte, I grieve to say, very reprehensively left one of those strange volumes right in her little brother's way."

"Not the one George Painter lent me?" said Charlotte, in a voice of horror.

"The same," said Paul, gleefully. "Now take Aspasia——"

"I'd rather not," observed Mrs. Manisty, tranquilly pouring a large jug of boiling water into the teapot. "From all I've been able to gather, she was a perfectly dreadful woman."

"Look out, Mother, you'll drown the tea," cried Nettie, in an anguished tone. "You know how we hate dish-water, even if it is so good for our nerves. Besides, you know Paul and I haven't got any."

"It was Pericles, then, who made her so," continued Paul, judicially, "with all his silly laws. At any rate, she did get a run for her money. Nettie, has it ever occurred to you to tell our beloved Simpson that Aspasia was the first woman to want the suffrage?"

"Did she get it?"

His mother replaced the empty hot water jug upon the silver tray before her.

"Let's talk of something else," she remarked, looking very displeased. With topics such as these she had no sympathy. Paul grinned.

"All right, Mum," he answered her, "but they were both really frightfully respectable people. Beastly dull and correct."

To create a diversion Charlotte now asked for some bacon, and suggested that the clock on the mantelpiece must be slow. Her mother glanced at it and then at the watch upon her wrist. "Indeed, no," she said, "the man came from the village only yesterday to wind it."

"What shall you do all day in London?" asked Henrietta.

For after much thought it had been decided that Charlotte was to break her journey and not cross the Channel until the following day, when Mr. Kingsbury, going over on business again, would take her to the house of Madame de Dasulas himself. The intervening day and night she was to spend with a sister of her father's—Aunt Elsie Cutting—who lived in a small house in an inconspicuous square in Chelsea. A not too pleasurable prospect for Charlotte, her aunt being a widow of uncertain age but very decided views, who possessed one daughter even more stolid than herself. Hilda was already much given to altruistically utilitarian good works. Neither approved to any very great extent of the livelier and far more charming Charlotte, or of her fanciful, spoilt ways. Considering her to be affected and insincere, if not flighty at heart. However, as they were to act as a kind of gateway to the new life, she had accepted the necessity of visiting these dreary relatives more blithely on this occasion than she had ever done in the past. Twenty-four hours would soon go.

"What shall I do all day? Why, dozens of things," she replied to her sister's inquiry. "Go to a matinée, anyway."

"I almost wish I was coming, too," Nettie murmured. "Only you'd a great deal rather not have me with you." Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, I don't know," she said disingenuously.

But when, on the windy little station platform, later on, the actual moment of parting with them all arrived, as the train puffed around the cutting, Charlotte found herself very much nearer tears than she had expected.

And almost ready, as she kissed and was kissed, to wish she had never decided to go out and see the world for herself.

"I don't suppose you'll be any of you a bit the same when I come back," she called, in a strangled tone, out of the carriage window as the train began to move slowly along the platform.

It was Paul who cried out in a surprisingly gruff voice, "Oh, yes, we shall."

Then everything became a little blurred and indistinct to her; the two children, each side of her mother, waving their arms vigorously; Mrs. Manisty staring after her, in her widow's bonnet and veil, with that curiously repressed expression on her face; the couple of porters leaning on their barrows; the few people also waving to friends or relations as the train gathered speed; the red brick station-building itself; and then the road beyond the white railings which led to the village a mile away; the bright flower-beds along the embankment till it rose too high; Charlotte as she turned back into her compartment was very glad she had it to herself.

It took most of the hour's familiar run to town for her to compose herself and argue herself again into her earlier confident frame of mind. For somehow the future loomed darkly, even menacingly, before her.

At Waterloo, her cousin Hilda met her, and instantly took charge of her and all of her belongings. She was, as has been before remarked, a matter-of-fact, stout young person, whose shrewd little eyes looked as if they could never shed a tear, no matter what the provocation.

Endowing Charlotte with a business-like kiss, she said, "I have a taxi and a porter, and will get your luggage for you at once," and thereafter proceeded to make good her boast with severe efficiency.

"I can't understand why all you porters are socialists," she told her weary specimen. "When you have steady pay and a job which seems to permit of your lounging

most of the day. I know many people who have much more right to be socialistic."

Before she seemed to have had time to draw more than half a dozen long breaths, Charlotte found herself with Hilda in a taxi, and being driven through the crowded traffic over the bridge and past the Houses of Parliament.

As they proceeded along Victoria Street, dodging neatly the motor busses, on their way to Chelsea and the forgotten square in which the Cuttings resided, Hilda turned to her.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but George Painter insisted on taking us out to lunch."

"Oh," said Charlotte.

"I simply couldn't get out of it, but we've got the whole afternoon for a matinée, and the morning for shopping. I told George we'd lunch at Fleming's."

Charlotte was conscious of a sensation of deep disappointment, and at the very beginning of things, too.

"Oh, Hilda," she cried, "what a bore! Am I never to get away from George Painter?"

Her cousin, sitting straight and massive already on the seat beside her, although she was still in her early twenties, removed her steady gaze from the contemplation of the slightly misty, busy scene, and trained a vexed countenance on Charlotte.

"Well, after today I should say you stood every chance of never seeing George again. I believe he is going to be sent on some journalistic job to the East. But he was so keen to see you, and I really did not know any reason why I should shove him away."

"If he'd only marry Cynthia or someone, and stop bothering me," sighed Charlotte.

Her cousin laughed shortly.

"I always thought he meant to marry you," she returned slowly.

"But that's a rotten idea."

"I don't know." Hilda had again turned her head and

was watching the hurrying people filling the pavements. "He could give you a home, at least, and in London. Which would mean that you got about a bit. However, now he's got this job abroad——"

"Yes, I know. Some horrid little flat like the one we had when we were children," returned Charlotte, impatiently. "I can just remember it. Everybody was always falling over everything."

"I'd rather have a small place in town than the biggest house in the country."

"London would mean nothing to me unless I lived in Knightsbridge," declared Charlotte.

"Why not in Mayfair at once?" Hilda was very scornful.

"I will not be a poor married woman."

"Then you'll probably end by being an old maid," retorted Hilda. "I shall marry the first man who asks me."

"Even George Painter?"

"Certainly, but he will never think of me. Though I should make him a very good wife," remarked Hilda shortly. "He's sure to choose some flapper for her looks."

The concentrated bitterness of the tone in which she spoke betrayed to Charlotte a fact she had never before dreamed of—Hilda more than liked George Painter. This astonishing discovery reduced her to silence from that moment until they reached her aunt's front door. Arrived there, Hilda paid the cab, and had the baggage taken up at once to a spare bedroom which Charlotte was to occupy. Then after having looked in a small den behind the dining room, used by the Cutting family mostly as a sewing room, for her mother, who was not there—"Gone out in the King's Road shopping, I suppose," said Hilda—both girls left the house, climbed on a motor bus at the Town Hall, and were finally deposited at the Marble Arch, from which point they made a thorough and extended inspection of all shop windows within a radius of at least a mile. On the whole, though they covered a good deal of ground, they disbursed very little actual cash.

"For after all," remarked Charlotte, in the middle of that manicure she had promised herself for the past ten days, "Paris is the place to buy clothes in."

The smart young person who was dignifiedly attending to the elegance of her nails allowed herself to smile faintly.

"Has Moddam been to Paris?" she murmured, in that super-elegant tone so often affected by the London sales-lady.

"Not yet," said Charlotte.

"Then Moddam has a great deal to see yet."

"So you've been to Paris?"

She raised her head.

"Several times," she returned briefly.

But this impression that Paris was the only place wherein to acquire a wardrobe did not find much favor with the waiting Hilda, who was sitting in an arm-chair close at hand.

"I can't see why people make such a fuss over things because they happen to come from France," she said. "I am sure our dresses are every bit as good, if not better——"

"Oh, Hilda," said Charlotte, "when it's well known——"

"Trade with your own country first," intoned her cousin, "that should be every patriotic person's motto. Our own country should be good enough for us. We are fools to welcome hordes of useless foreigners, who eat us up and corrupt our people's morals."

"Don't you believe in the brotherhood of man?" asked Charlotte, to whom this pronouncement of Hilda's came as a great surprise. "But of course you do. I've heard you say so often."

"In reason," replied Hilda, "but home products first, last and all the time."

Here the young begum working delicately upon Charlotte's hands permitted herself to smile loftily again.

"Paris is so very effervescing," she remarked. "It quite goes to one's head. But they can design clothes."

Charlotte was contemplating her cousin reflectively.

"Don't you want to travel, Hilda?" she asked.

Miss Cutting did not seem to think so.

"Why should I?" she demanded, "when there are such heaps of places to see here. Explore your own country first. I'm certain there's just as beautiful scenery in these islands of ours as anywhere else in the world."

Charlotte murmured, "What about the Himalayas?" as being the only outstanding name she could think of just then.

"Mountains and mountain climbing," announced her cousin, "have not the slightest attraction for me. Besides, today you can see all those scenic effects in the movies, sitting quite comfortably in a chair. Which," she added firmly, "I'd personally much rather do."

Charlotte looked at her doubtfully. This was a stuffiness, as Paul would have expressed it, in the energetic Hilda, she had not expected to find.

"But that seems so unenterprising," she rejoined. "I thought everyone wanted to travel in these days. Hilda, it's all so much easier than it used to be."

The discussion upon this subject lasted them intermittently until they arrived at the restaurant indicated by Hilda to George Painter as the proper scene for his projected hospitality.

"No use making him pay too much," she said. "His salary is none too large, and as a matter of fact, I'd far rather pay for myself. Anyway, I hate those fashionable restaurants."

"That's the difference between you and me," observed Charlotte with a sigh. "I can't see any reason why people who entertain me should not attend to the bill. And I fairly love good food and pretty clothes."

"Parasite," said Hilda Cutting.

But suddenly realizing that they were more than a quarter of an hour late, hurried into the crowded place without listening to Charlotte's mutinous "I never could see why we had to do everything ourselves just because

we were born in the twentieth century. It takes half the grace out of life."

As she knew he would be, George was there, large as life and twice as natural, just inside the entrance, waiting for them with a tiresomely martyrlike and unnecessarily suffering expression on his indeterminate features.

His first words were ones of grave reproof. But leaving Hilda to make all the apologies needed, Charlotte, after shaking hands with him, wrapped herself in a mantle of bored silence. It appeared that he had already secured a table in a good position, and set there on guard-duty a newspaper friend of his, one Peter Waters.

"How thoughtful of you, George," said Hilda, and for once her voice was almost cooing.

To him, therefore, entrenched among a quartette of chairs, and holding the fort against all comers, George Painter now led his guests.

Charlotte found herself inclined to like Mr. Waters, and slipped promptly into a chair beside him, before George could interfere.

Exuberant of manner, after the ceremonial introductions had been effected, he declared in the happiest idiom that he had been the recipient of a more than ordinarily tough time.

"It's amazing how wild people become when they want to eat," he confided to Charlotte. "The lion is mild in comparison. It was all I could do to hold on to these chairs with my teeth," he told the openly sceptical Hilda.

"With your teeth, Mr. Waters?" she repeated, staring at him incredulously. "Isn't that a little exaggerated?"

"A mere figure of speech," and he turned to Charlotte again, who immediately congratulated him on possessing so determined a character. Thereby not only winning his attention for the rest of that meal, but also temporarily that very battered organ he called his heart. For Mr. Waters was a creature compacted of emotion and impulse, albeit at the same time an excellent journalist.

As the meal, substantial and uninspired, progressed, George Painter found to his dismay that Charlotte was much more interested in his friend's lively chatter than in his own more staid discoursings. At last he managed to attract and hold her attention by announcing that in the next few months he should probably be seeing her after all.

"Where?" she asked, not at all allured by the idea.

"In Paris," he returned promptly, "I have just managed to wangle an assignment out of my chief to do a series of articles on the Moroccan situation."

"Morocco," murmured Charlotte, simply thunderstruck.

"So I shall have to stay some weeks in Paris getting dope on the French angle first."

This was so tremendous a blow that she felt absolutely weak-kneed. It seemed that she was never to be rid of George—that regular old man of the sea. Now he was following her to Morocco also.

"Did you ask to go there?" she demanded wrathfully, and then relapsed into her earlier silence and gloom when he informed her that such had been his intention from the very moment that Miss Simpson had told him of Charlotte's plans at Mrs. Adams' tennis party the month before.

"Certainly I asked to go. It's a great chance. And I thought I could keep an eye on you, too, Charlotte," he finished with a heavy attempt at jocularity.

His friend, offering her cousin at the moment a cigarette, turned to say, "I envy you, Painter. If you've never been there before you can't begin to guess what an amazing contrast you'll find it."

"I daresay."

"The East and the West—whole æons apart."

George now felt he must quote Kipling on the subject.

"For East is East and West is West——"

"I do think that's the silliest thing anybody ever wrote," burst out Hilda. "As if everybody wasn't aware of it. How could it be anything different?"

"And never the twain shall meet," continued George.

"Oh, do stop!" cried Charlotte. "How many thousand times have I heard those two lines! I should think Kipling would be very sorry he ever wrote them."

"But it's time," said Hilda, bringing heavy guns into action, "that they all got civilized over there."

Peter Waters laughed.

"What with?" he asked. "Radio—flying machines—motors—every mechanical contrivance we have——"

"They should not be allowed to remain in the fifteenth century," admitted George.

"All these inventions they may enjoy in time," continued Peter, "but as long as they believe—really believe—in Allah and his prophet Mahomet, you will not change their way of thinking." Mr. Waters seemed very certain about this. "After all, even a short visit to this curious country makes you admit that there is something in their point of view. Thought has always ruled the world—armies and trade are only a result."

But Miss Cutting did not agree with him.

"We ought to be able to teach them to think our way. It's much the best way. Look at the blessings we enjoy —medicine, sanitation, education."

Peter considered her declaration for a space. Then he suggested, "Perhaps the reason we pipe to deaf ears is because they prefer perfumes to strong drink." Hilda looked openly disgusted.

"Men!" she said with an indescribable intonation.

"Besides, they really do not want to be educated in our way. And they have a great contempt for us of the West. For one thing, they consider we are spoiling their land."

"Spoiling their land?" George was shocked. "But they must in the end come into line. No country can afford to stay behind another in the march of progress today. It is economically unsound."

"But that's just it," said Peter, "they decline to look on life as a race for power and prosperity. They are filled with horror at our love of gold."

"How odd!" said Hilda Cutting. "There seems very little hope for them."

"Oh, well," Peter consoled her, "in a race every one cannot be first."

"But they should want to be," she pointed out.

"The fact is, they much prefer their own way of doing things."

"But only look at the position of their women."

He gave Hilda an openly amused look after this.

"I suppose you'd be astounded if I were to tell you that if we look down on their harems, they are equally contemptuous of the way we keep sex continually in the foreground. Eternally, as an old friend of mine, Prince Mohammed Ali, used to say, surrounding ourselves by the female—most unbecomingly clad."

"Surely that's not so with them all," said George Painter.

"Pretty nearly," returned his friend. "How often Mohammed Ali has told me that we are simply slaves to material things I wouldn't undertake to say. Thereby missing the great realities of life."

"What are the realities of life?" asked Charlotte. "And who is this Prince?"

"Was," corrected Peter, answering the last question first. "He died about six weeks ago—as a matter of fact he was killed. He was one of the most powerful of the sheiks in his part of the country. He had a great feudal castle far beyond Marrakesch in the southern mountains. I once stayed six months with him and had the time of my life. Marrakesch is the old Moorish capital. It's between Fez and the coast. Fez is about four days' journey into the interior."

"That's a good geography lesson," said George.

"And as for the realities of life, Miss Manisty," he continued, "I suppose they are Truth, Beauty and Love. The Moors hold we haven't the foggiest notion what love is."

"Well, what is it?" asked Charlotte irritably, "after all?"

Mournfully George Painter regarded her.

"Charlotte, I hate to hear you say 'after all' in just that contemptuous tone," he grumbled.

"Oh, well," she returned, "I'm sick of the subject."

"At your age?" Peter's eyes met hers and they both laughed.

"Some day you'll know what love is," remarked Hilda sombrely.

A sudden tendency to blush again overwhelmed Charlotte, for the second time that day.

"If I ever do," she cried in the most exasperated of voices, "I hope I shall get at least a romantic lover."

Her cousin gasped. This was exactly the kind of mood in Charlotte she found so distressing. But she supposed glumly that good breeding and Charlotte were after all only bowing acquaintances, and that it was not the slightest use expecting a nature like hers to show much consideration for other people's feelings. Often when with her she wished good manners might be still in fashion for their usefulness on just such occasions as the present, if for nothing else.

However, quite determined not to allow the inconsiderate chit to mar completely by her waywardness an hour to which she had looked forward eagerly for a week or more, Miss Cutting, although she found it uphill work, now took the conversation into her own extremely capable hands. Seeing to it firmly, though her methods may have been somewhat like those of a steam roller, that less debatable and troubling subjects than love and lovers were raised and considered by the company generally.

"We shall all be discussing modern divorce before we know where we are," she reflected uneasily. And Heaven alone knew what flaming revolutionary opinions on this subject Charlotte, out of sheer perverseness, might delight to advance. Possibly even that dreadful thing—companionate marriage. Hilda shuddered at the very thought.

Best keep talk in less stormy channels.

Finally she looked at her watch.

"I'm very afraid we ought to be off at once," she observed apologetically, "that is, if Charlotte and I are to see 'Rose Marie' today."

"Going to Drury Lane as a last bust-up?" asked Peter. "Well, you ought to enjoy the show. It's full of color and the music is very catchy."

"Have you girls already bought your tickets?"

George's manner was so eager that Charlotte fairly rushed to assure him these had been acquired days before.

He looked disappointed at once.

"Then it would be no good my coming with you on the chance of getting a seat near you at the last moment. I should not be within miles of you, I expect."

"No," said Charlotte, and before he could have another brain wave of some sinister kind, added firmly, "You know as well as I do, George, the theatre is always sold out. Besides, I think you might realize I should like to spend a little time with Hilda today." This had only just occurred to her. "I shan't see her again for goodness knows how long."

But in spite of an extended and touching farewell on his part, it was not till she and her cousin, distinctly flattered by Charlotte's careless admission of affection for her society, were actually sitting, program in hand, with George's parting gift of a large box of chocolates between them, in their inexpensive upstairs seats, that she really breathed easily. Nor was it till the overture was ended and the curtain had risen for some minutes on the first act that she dared to abandon herself completely to the enjoyment of the moment.

She knew so well how this delightful musical piece she had so longed to see would have been utterly ruined for her had the obtuse George pulled off his bright idea of accompanying them at the last moment. For if he had managed to get as far as the doors of Drury Lane, undoubtedly he would have evolved some wily means of removing a sullen Hilda to a distant part of the house, on the

pretext that he had found her so much better a seat that he could not think of depriving her of it. Some such nonsense coupled with a candy bribe, he certainly would have imposed on them. For Charlotte was obliged to admit that George, in the pursuit of his own purposes, was not without a certain crude gift of strategy.

Sighing contentedly that for once fate seemed to have been on her side, Charlotte lost herself in the romantic stage happenings.

"But I might easily have had to let him kiss me before the afternoon was over," she reflected, "he's so persistent."

2.

That her cousin's reflections upon the happily absent George had been running on much the same lines became apparent to Charlotte later that evening.

She was sitting before the glass in her bedroom, brushing out her hair slowly and dreaming of some fortunate chance which might in the future allow her to meet again the elusive Nicolas Vaurien, when Hilda, in a remarkable purple wadded dressing gown, marched into the room.

In what Charlotte, who knew it of old, had christened the "purple horror," she presented a striking contrast to her cousin, who, arrayed in the thinnest of muslin and lace pajamas, decorated with cute silk flowers upon the shoulder and pocket, had allowed her blue silk wrapper to fall more than half off her slim shoulders.

"Upon my word," said she to the advancing figure, "I should have thought by now you would have got rid of that dreadful creation."

"What's wrong with it?" asked Hilda. "It's comfortable, warm, and there's lots more wear in it." And she went and stood before the long glass in the wardrobe, to cast a perfectly contented look over her appearance. "Of course I don't pretend to be a beauty," she said.

Then she turned back to Charlotte, with an air of much resolution.

"Listen, Lotta," she said, taking a chair close at hand, "I've got to get something off my chest. I want to come to an understanding with you."

"What about?"

"And I don't want you to be offended if I speak plainly. Because the thing's too important to be petty and childish over."

"I'll try not to be. Go on. What is it?"

"It concerns George," announced Hilda solemnly.

Charlotte sighed.

"Oh, dear," she said.

"But it's not what you think—I'm no ambassador. What I want to know is, are you really certain you won't get jockeyed into taking him in the end?"

Charlotte threw her hair over her shoulders impatiently.

"I'd rather be shot."

"That's good hearing," said Hilda.

"My dear, he's not at all my style. He'd bore me stiff in a couple of days." And she made a wide gesture of bestowal. "You are welcome to him, Hilda," gurgled Charlotte, on whom her cousin's solemnity of demeanor was having a markedly regrettable effect.

Minute by minute she found it more difficult to refrain from making open fun of the situation and Hilda too. If her cousin could only know how funny she looked, and how unattractive. Suddenly Charlotte found herself quite sorry for George. The poor fellow had not the slightest chance of escape. Hilda was sure to get him in the end. Well, probably they would be a very well matched couple. It would be their children who would find them heavy going.

But Hilda was speaking again.

"If I can get him," said she.

"You'll get him." Charlotte's tone was quite certain, and warily encouraging. "He won't be too difficult to land.

Play the simple life, and lectures, and Cook's tours in the summer. A fortnight in lovely Lucerne for five guineas! He won't really enjoy roughing it in Morocco. He can't ride for nuts. Just imagine him on a camel!"

The mental picture these words evoked was quite too much for Charlotte, who went off promptly into peals of laughter.

"I bet he comes back much quicker than he goes," she said finally, wiping her eyes.

Her cousin shook a gloomy, straightly bobbed head.

"Not while you're there, I'm afraid," she replied. "It's too hard luck he should be going to just the same places you are."

"And you won't be able to turn on the sympathy tap, which is always so effective——"

Hilda looked indignant.

"I don't know what you mean," she said.

Charlotte laughed.

"Oh, yes, you do," she cried.

"Don't be ridiculous. Don't you think I'm sincere?"

"What has sincerity got to do with making George love you? You want the man, don't you?"

Hilda sat still for a moment meditatively.

"You certainly have the most detestable way of putting things, but I suppose—I do."

Charlotte raised her hand high in the air.

"Then I call you to witness, and Heaven, and all the prophets too, that his going abroad is no fault of mine. You could have knocked me down with a feather when he announced it today. Nobody could have been more annoyed—when he threw the news at me like a bone at a dog."

Hilda leaned forward.

"Promise me you won't encourage him."

"Certainly not," replied Charlotte, with a touch of irritation in her air, "and I never have. And what is more, surely I needn't see him in Paris. Probably I shall be far

too busy. You seem to forget I'm going there to earn my living—not for pleasure. Not that seeing George would be any pleasure."

She laid down her brush and began to plait her hair slowly into two braids.

"What kind of people are you going to?" Hilda was asking. "Do they go out much, entertain a lot?"

"When old Jeremiah came down to see us——"

"You mean Mr. Kingsbury."

"Ah, go on," replied Charlotte, and making a face at her cousin, threw the first complete pigtail over her shoulder, "don't be prim. "You know I do. Well, when he came down, he told Mother that Madame de Dasulas was a very social sort of person."

"Yes?"

"She was an old friend of his, it turned out. Most luckily for me. I needn't have bothered myself half as much as I did. I had quite a row with Mother, and it was all wasted. For old Kingsbury was quite lamb-like about the whole affair."

"Really?"

"The old lady's husband had gone to glory, or to skate upon the sea of glass, many years ago," pursued Charlotte.

"I wish you wouldn't be so flippant," snapped Hilda.

"I can't help it," confessed Charlotte, "it's the effect that 'purple horror' always has on me. It looks so ecclesiastical."

"Go on about Madame de Dasulas."

"Well, she had no children of her own, but is devoted to her nephews and nieces, according to Jeremiah. And, which sounded more hopeful to me, is supposed to be very indulgent to those who work for her. And that's all I know."

Hilda sighed heavily.

"Then probably she'll encourage George to come and see you."

"Why need she know anything about the creature?" de-

manded Charlotte in an exasperation she made no effort to conceal.

"Because," returned Hilda impressively, "nobody can ever keep things for long to themselves in this world, it seems to me. Somebody always talks. And as he is bound to know your address—a dozen of our mutual friends could hand it to him any day—you bet he'll find some way of worming himself in as a visitor to that house, sooner or later. He'll pretend he's got to report something for his paper."

The thought turned Charlotte quite pale, and she began to strangle herself thoughtfully with her second plait.

"What a perfectly frightful notion!" said she. "Hilda, don't be so morbid."

"And probably in the end he'll persuade you," wailed Hilda.

"He will not!"

"Ah, you just say that, but you know very well how persistent he is when he wants anything. He's been like that from a boy, and at present he certainly thinks he wants you."

"But I can be determined, too, and I can promise you solemnly, Hilda, if he was the last pair of trousers in the world, I'd refuse him."

"Don't be vulgar," cried her cousin, although this was satisfactory as far as it went. "I only wish you were in love with somebody else," she said.

Charlotte giggled.

"How do you know I'm not?" she asked.

"You're so cold," said Hilda.

"Oh, bother you all. What makes every person I meet declare loudly that I have no feelings—that I'm ice, marble, stone or iron? That doesn't sound very nice for a young gal to be."

But although her words were frivolous, her eyes held a shadow of pain in them.

Hilda stared at her. The outburst, serio-comic though she had made it, had been accompanied by a singularly vivid blush.

"You don't mean to say you're in love," cried Hilda hopefully.

Charlotte unwound the braid from about her throat, threw it over her shoulder and began to walk up and down the room.

"I don't really know," she said in a half-whisper.

"Who is he?"

"That I don't know, either," returned Charlotte.

"You don't know?"

"Yes, ridiculous, isn't it? But somehow neither Nettie nor I believe the name he went under was his own. Swear, Hilda, if I tell you about it, you'll hold your tongue."

Hilda was prompt to take the oath required, and listened to Charlotte's vivid tale of her meetings with the Adams' odd guest with a flattering intentness. She did not interrupt the strange narrative at all.

"Is that all?" she demanded, when Charlotte sat silent once more.

"Yes."

"The whole thing is deuced queer," was Hilda's verdict.

"I suppose so."

"And you say you've only seen him twice?"

There was a pause.

"Only twice," repeated Hilda, insistently.

"Well——"

"Go on," commanded Hilda, "you don't mean to say he didn't leave that next day after all?"

"Well, not till the afternoon," admitted Charlotte. Her cousin came and stood over her.

"What happened in the morning?"

"Before he took the train? He wasn't allowed to motor. That annoyed him very much."

"I'm not interested in the method of his departure. What happened in the morning?"

Charlotte looked about the room as though it suddenly possessed for her a perfectly different aspect.

"I'm sure I ought to finish my packing tonight," she said vaguely.

"I'll help you later." Hilda was obdurate. "You'll have to tell me what happened that morning."

"We went on the river," said Charlotte slowly, "I punted him to a backwater I know of—you know he couldn't use his arm."

"Yes, of course I know that."

"We had a very pleasant time—yes, very pleasant."

"I'm sure of that."

"Yes—very pleasant, on the whole—and then we came back."

"And——"

"Oh, Hilda, you do want to know so much!"

"And——"

Her cousin's tone was growing more and more peremptory.

"Well, you know as well as I do he kissed me."

Hilda rose from her seat.

"That certainly relieves my mind," she said briskly. "No, you will never marry George now."

CHAPTER 5

CHARLOTTE'S journey to the house of Madame de Dasulas in the Rue de Bellechasse turned out to be from first to last a stimulating experience.

Duly the next morning she met, at Charing Cross, according to plan, a bluff Mr. Kingsbury, experienced in travelling and competent to get his own way with train officials and porters. Speaking French fluently, too, it seemed, when the need arose.

Charlotte, taking a warm farewell of a Hilda who had exerted herself to see her cousin thus far on her journey as a sign of the bond cemented between them the night before, entrusted her with a telegram to be dispatched to her family—stating that she had started her pilgrimage under the best auspices and in the fairest weather—and travelled down to Dover opposite her guardian in the highest spirits.

Throughout their passage through the pleasant Kentish land, she was inclined to smile joyously at very little, and hum at intervals under her breath a rhyme—slightly altered, to be sure, from the original—that had been dear to her in childhood. Thus brought up to date, Charlotte's arrangement ran—

> "Where are you going to, my pretty maid?"
> "I'm going to Paris, kind sir," she said.

To Mr. Kingsbury, however, immersed behind the pages of his morning paper in the state of the stock market, the lyric, and light-hearted, query and reply did not penetrate. There had been a turn-over in certain shares the day before on which he had been keeping an eye, and he was in consequence full of mental calculations right up to the moment

when they caught their first glimpse of the English Channel lying as placid as a mill-pond in the September sunshine.

"Lucky—we're going to have an excellent crossing," he told Charlotte, a note of relief perceptible in his mellow, jovial voice.

Near the land fishing smacks were moving slowly over the lazy water, and until the boat started Charlotte amused herself by leaning against the rail and watching the crane on the quay plunge huge loads of netted baggage into the blackness of the hold. Finally, the last piece of luggage on board and the gangways withdrawn, they began to move out of the harbor with a hooting of sirens and clanging of bells, which aroused in her a queer feeling of exhilaration. By degrees the town, rising in terraces above the bustle of the station and harbor, receded and the white cliffs and the castle blurred into a distance which at last engulfed them.

Charlotte for the first time in her life had actually left her own country behind her.

Still with bright eyes and a secret exultation she reflected, "So this is goodbye to England for a bit, and at last I am really on my own. I wonder what will have happened by the time I see these cliffs again."

A little sobered by this question, she sought her chair in a sheltered spot alongside that of the already comfortably reclining Jeremiah. Who, deep though he was in a detective story he had bought at the book stall for the transit between the shores of his own country and France, yet roused himself sufficiently, from its intricacies, to tuck Charlotte up very comfortably, rug and all, in her seat, before he lost himself again in its sinister happenings. Left to amuse herself, she alternately watched the sea and her fellow passengers during the hour's voyage. Towards the end of it she began to think of the debonair Nicolas—who, truth to tell, was never now far from her reflections. Suppose she had the luck to meet him in the next fortnight? He had certainly intimated that, although he was first

bound on some long and tiresome journey into, as he expressed it, a wilderness far south of her destination, he yet might conceivably be back in Paris during the month of September. It was this hope that had sustained Charlotte through all the hurry and bustle of the last four weeks. He had even admitted that the name of Marie de Dasulas was not unknown to him, and waxing confidential while she punted him down stream on that last stolen morning together, had spoken of a certain Gabrielle he seemed to know almost too well, Charlotte thought. A cousin of Madame's and a paragon of all the virtues. Ever since hearing the name—Gabrielle Davonier—Charlotte had suffered obscure twinges of jealousy. Just how friendly were they, she wondered. And could any girl be as unspoilt and charming as he had made her out to be?

"You like them clinging," she had told him pertly.

"No, I like them well-bred," he had returned coolly.

In spite of herself, Charlotte found after that that she was inclined to think twice before she spoke, and make spasmodic efforts to be less self-centered.

But by the time Calais swam into view and more fishing craft came about them, she was too much taken up with her first glimpse of French soil to waste any further time then on distracting and inconclusive speculations. As to the shadowy Gabrielle, she would be probably meeting her quite soon. And then she would certainly find out all about her admirer without any delay.

Gallantly Charlotte struggled through the jostling, pushing mass of passengers, over the gang-plank, along the cobbled quay and into the echoing, bare Douane, in the wake of a steadily striding Jeremiah, trying to take in the foreign looking houses round the vicinity of the harbor, the blue bloused porters, the brown faced, lounging men about the quays, the steady eyed women sedately moving great burdens of fish, as she went. The noisy shouting in the Douane fascinated her.

"Keep close to me," called back Mr. Kingsbury, and

got himself and her and their hand baggage past the customs and into the compartment in the Paris train almost the first of anybody there.

"We don't bother about the heavy baggage till we get to the Nord station," he told her as he tipped his porters adequately but not impressively.

"How terribly quickly they all talk!" gasped Charlotte, who had been trying vainly to disentangle a few phrases she knew in the Babel of sound now beginning all about them again as the train filled up. The place resounded with high-pitched French voices and deeper English examples. Excited ladies demanded that the whole system of foreign travel should be changed to suit their immediate needs, while other sophisticated but complaining souls remarked bitterly that in that pandemonium it was not to be expected that anything could go right. People clutched their hand baggage and stood guard over golf clubs with a defiant savagery induced by the surroundings. A consensus of opinion found that the French were still a volatile, too-talkative nation on serious occasions like the present.

But the shouting died down the wind as the train suddenly jerked itself away from its platform and prepared to sway along the road to Paris.

To add, however, to the confused noise of voices emerging from every compartment throughout the length and breadth of the ornate French express, an official now came treading purposefully along its corridors, ringing a little hand-bell most violently.

"Jabber, jabber, jabber," said Mr. Kingsbury, "they can't get along without exercising all the tongues they possess. But you'll have to do it, too, Charlotte, if you want to get about in this country. Come along. That infernal racket means the first lunch."

Producing two tickets, already providently acquired by him for the feast, he piloted Charlotte down the rocking corridor to the dining car.

Here they were placed at the table at which a Frenchman and his spouse were already seated.

That meal, so new in its arrangement and cooking, Charlotte enjoyed immensely, even to the clear Moselle which Mr. Kingsbury made her try.

Returning to their compartment quite three-quarters of an hour later, they found that, besides the old lady knitting in the far corner, they had in their absence acquired another travelling companion.

Charlotte glanced at the rack above his head, whereon reposed a couple of leather bags. She caught sight of half a name—Claude de—inscribed on one label, and the word *Haussmann* on another.

Mr. Kingsbury, standing in the doorway, was still idly contemplating the peaceful scene.

"Only four of us," he said in a low tone, as he bent to hand her some magazines. "That's a comfort. I must say I like to be able to stretch my legs. There have been times when I've crossed when it's been so abominably crowded——"

He broke off to stare oddly at the newcomer, who was at the moment gazing pensively out of the window at the chalk-white roads which intersected the flat, uninteresting stretch of country through which the train seemed to be insecurely speeding.

The sudden cessation of his remarks made the stranger turn his head.

He was dark and distinguished, with a carefully trimmed brown beard, and a pair of bright, glancing eyes set in an oval, sallow face.

"Why, it isn't—it can't be——" said Mr. Kingsbury uncertainly, plunging into the French language. "I never saw you on the boat, Monsieur de Brancas."

Charlotte, who was about to retire behind the the pages of the Tatler, looked curiously over the top of that frolicsome journal, while Monsieur de Brancas, hearing his name, turned his attention more completely on his neighbors.

His eye met Charlotte's, registering discreet admiration, before he replied to Mr. Kingsbury.

"But I saw you, my dear fellow."

Then he rose, laughed, and shook hands with the man of law.

"And I wondered," he continued, "what writer was fortunate enough to claim so deep an attention. But what brings you to Paris so soon again?"

Sedately Mr. Kingsbury explained that business, as ever, drew him back, but that on this occasion it was also his good fortune to be escorting his ward to the capital of France, and moreover, upon her first visit. He begged that he might have the honor of presenting her to Monsieur le Baron.

Monsieur de Brancas professed himself delighted and came to sit by Charlotte.

"Enfin, we have some considerable time before us, and can make to ourselves a little visit, is it not so?" he asked. "Mademoiselle perhaps speaks French?"

"Not as well as I could wish," said Charlotte. "Every one seems to talk so fast. But I can understand pretty well."

"Then I will speak your language," he observed pleasantly, "and so we shall make ourselves a little *entente cordiale.*"

He was so charming and took so much trouble to entertain her that Charlotte, unaccustomed as she was to an old-fashioned courtesy of this kind, soon fell under the spell of it and found herself chattering away to him quite unrestrainedly. Mr. Kingsbury, from behind the current number of the Spectator, joined in now and then.

"Miss Manisty is to be with our old friend, Madame de Dasulas, this winter, I hope," he said.

Monsieur de Brancas warmly congratulated Charlotte on her good fortune.

"You are going to a most amiable woman," he affirmed. "And if you are making the journey to Morocco with her

later on, you will find that she possesses one of the most beautiful houses in Tangiers. I should much like to be with you when you first see the frowning walls of that remarkable city. One can perceive the hills of Spain across the Straits. And the sunshine—at seven in the morning it is too much for the eyes."

"Everything I hear about Madame de Dasulas and the way she lives sounds romantic," said Charlotte.

"Ah, Mademoiselle," exclaimed Monsieur de Brancas, "it is because she is and always has been a real romantic at heart that her life has been so full of the unusual. Besides, with her only sister married to one of the great tribal chiefs of the interior——"

Charlotte opened her eyes widely.

"Married to an Arab?" she asked in a tone of aversion.

"The Moors—especially this particular family—are a race apart. I think for a hundred years now, Mohammed Ali's forebears have married western wives. It is a tradition with them."

"Mohammed Ali? Where have I heard that name?"

And then she remembered it was George Painter's friend who had stayed once with this celebrity for six months at his feudal castle in the mountains beyond Marrakesch.

"But he is dead, isn't he?" asked Charlotte.

Mr. Kingsbury looked his astonishment.

"Yes. But what do you know about him?" he demanded.

"A friend of George Painter's was speaking of him yesterday."

But the lawyer did not seem anxious to pursue the subject, and looked distinctly put out when Monsieur de Brancas remarked that he thought Madame de Dasulas was far too good-natured in taking her nephew's bride under her wing for the four months which yet had to elapse before she was married to Prince Zeid.

"I often wish," said Mr. Kingsbury pettishly, "that these powerful Sheiks of the South country were not mixed up so intimately with Madame de Dasulas and her family.

There seems to have been nothing but disturbance and trouble since this man's grandfather abducted his first European wife. It is all very well to say that for three or four generations the men of that house have had French mothers—they are still a far too wild lot."

The Baron laughed tolerantly.

"But there cannot be much native blood left in this family now," he said. "Mohammed Ali was more European than his people quite liked at times. Though he was one of the most successful of their rulers. And Zeid will be the same. I hear, since he has come back from taking up the reins of government there, he is determined to install a modern nursing school of medicine and hygiene within the walls of his palace. That shows his mind."

Mr. Kingsbury pursed his lips.

"Zeid is too impetuous," he said.

Monsieur de Brancas smiled.

"But he can be very secret and wily, too," he reminded the lawyer.

"I know that too well," said Jeremiah.

"The Princess will be in Tangiers this winter."

Very grimly Mr. Kingsbury remarked that he was excessively sorry to hear such news. "His mother, as we all know, possesses a most difficult nature."

"A stormy petrel indeed," assented the Frenchman. "Madame de Dasulas may yet regret she has chosen just this year in which to return to Tangiers after so long an absence. But with the headstrong Zeid a bridegroom we must hope that things will go more easily."

"If he will only develop some sense of responsibility."

The talk then drifted away to other less personal topics.

Charlotte was informed that she must certainly learn to eat kous-kous-soo, which Monsieur de Brancas admitted was an almost impossible feat for a European.

"What is it?" she asked.

Monsieur de Brancas laughed. "It is a cereal so treated that it's more like sawdust than anything else," he told

her. "But the Moors take it by the handful, manage to roll it into a ball, and then toss it into their mouths. Oh, it is quite the performance of a gymnast, Mademoiselle."

"I don't think I should care about it."

"You may like their tea better—only it is of a sweetness! And with fresh mint leaves crushed in it."

This concoction sounded so strange to Charlotte that again she shook her head dubiously.

"But the country you must admire," continued Monsieur de Brancas, "and those great rolling waves coming in from the Atlantic at the Cape of Spartel. There the lighthouse overlooks both the Mediterranean and the ocean. There is nothing between you and the great continent of America. Yes, Morocco is very beautiful," he ended, "there is much romance to be found there."

"Almost too much," said Mr. Kingsbury.

In the taxi, after Monsieur de Brancas had taken a cordial leave of them and they were leaving the vast, gloomy spaces of the Gare du Nord, Charlotte turned to Jeremiah Kingsbury.

"But that is a most charming man," said she.

Mr. Kingsbury chuckled.

"And very rich, Charlotte. A diplomat and a bachelor; and they do say he's looking out for a wife at last. So now's your chance."

Charlotte decided to ignore a pleasantry she disliked. But "Rich," she repeated, doubtfully, "and then, he's old."

"Good heavens," cried Mr. Kingsbury, "he isn't forty yet. His beard makes him look more middle-aged than he is. But then most Frenchmen wear beards."

"A horrid habit," reflected Charlotte.

2.

Driving through crowded and animated boulevards, by here and there a church which seemed to dominate whole

vistas of busy streets; continually rushing past odd little busses crowded with people inside and upon the much too small platform behind; avoiding at the last moment knocking down hurrying pedestrians taking their lives in their hands in foolhardy attempts to cross from one side of the road to the other; swerving round vivid newspaper kiosks at corners of streets where swarthy dames in little crocheted cross-over shawls sold a multitude of flimsy journals; passing numberless out-of-door cafés, whose patrons sat sipping their drinks at little round tables right on the pavement; catching a sudden glimpse of an impressive pile of buildings Mr. Kingsbury informed her was the Louvre; rattling over a long bridge under which the Seine flowed gently, and some barges and a small steamer went their several ways—Charlotte at last reached the end of her journey and the Rue de Bellechasse.

Some way down this much less lively street, before a tall house which looked like every other house thereabout, gray and discreetly curtained, the taxi stopped finally, and Mr. Kingsbury, alighting from the rattling vehicle, rather sardonically congratulated its driver on having brought them safely through apparently so many and great dangers. Then he rang the bell belonging to the porte cochère after he had given Charlotte a hand and she had joined him on the pavement.

In a few minutes an ascetic looking man-servant came out to greet them and bring in their baggage, aided by a gawky boy. In the background a couple of maid servants, in plain black dresses and white aprons, hovered solicitously.

"Qu'elle est mignonne," said one to the other, looking at Charlotte.

In fluent, if execrably accented French, Mr. Kingsbury greeted Felix and Jean, Ursule and Simone, and was received by them with Gallic volubility and warmth.

That ceremony concluded, the maids vanished with the hand-bags, and Jean, with the heavier articles, while Felix

conducted them up three or four steps through a glass door, into a large hall; supported at its four corners by marble pillars. At the far end of this imposing place a stair-case, also of marble, wound up out of sight to upper floors. Two tall windows heavily curtained with thick yellow net looked out on the street.

"Here we are, Charlotte," said Mr. Kingsbury, and piloted her into a great library which seemed to run the entire length of the house just there. "Now you sit down here for a moment, my dear, for Felix tells me Madame de Dasulas wishes to see me alone for a few minutes before I take you to her. But I shan't be long—and then I'll come and fetch you."

"I hope," said Charlotte, with a sudden sinking of the heart now that she was on the point of meeting her new employer, "she isn't going to be too frightfully particular and strict. For if she is, I believe I'd rather go home."

"Don't be a silly goose," advised Mr. Kingsbury, and left her.

Charlotte, thus abandoned, sank on the nearest chair and began to look about her.

The room was high and airy, and was lined from floor to ceiling with books wherever there was a clear space. These seemed to be in no less than four languages, and some to Charlotte looked very heavy reading.

The two hivgh windows, overlooking a courtyard in which there were numerous flowering shrubs in pots, stood widely opened to the afternoon breeze which swayed their lace curtains softly.

Before a great open fireplace on the right of the door by which she had come in, and above which there hung an oil painting of a young girl in a ball dress of the eighties, there was a large couch piled up with cushions, drawn up at right angles. And by it there was a round table with paper backed novels and periodicals upon it, and a Chinese lamp. A large photograph of a French cavalry officer in a silver frame stood out conspicuously.

Charlotte's glance falling on this object, she went over to it to get a nearer look.

"My goodness," said she, "if it isn't what Nettie would always call 'that Nicolas person.' And very like him, too."

A voice behind her said—

"I'm so glad you think so."

Charlotte swung round.

"How do you do—welcome to our city," said he gaily and held out his hand. "I told you we would meet again before long."

Blank surprise robbed Charlotte of speech at first, and limply she allowed him to shake her warmly by the hand.

"What kind of a journey did you have?" he continued.

He seemed to her so indifferent, so much too handsome and sure of himself, and so at home standing there regarding her mischievously, that seeing him thus in so dignified an environment and one to which she felt he was completely suited, Charlotte's heart sank. It was with very little of her usual sang-froid that she replied to his civil questions.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked her at last, looking unaffectedly puzzled over this new, meek, almost gauche Charlotte.

"Rapunzel, have they frozen you again since we last met?" he demanded.

The carelessly caressing tone, added to the amused look he bent on her, was all too much for Charlotte; tired out as she was with two days of high pressure and travel. And to her intense mortification she found herself beginning to cry helplessly. Tears rolled endlessly down her cheeks, tasting bitterly salt on her lips; and she was quite unable to choke back her sobs, try as she would. In short, she was no longer a modern young person at all. She might have been her own grandmother. All she wanted was a bottle of strong smelling salts to be complete.

"Oh, why am I such a fool!" she thought wildly, gulping. "What will he think of me now?"

But she could not have done anything more calculated to cause him concern. A pretty girl in tears is always a tremendous sight.

For as she stood there before him in her trim little frock with its gray fur neckpiece, her golden hair crowned with the smart felt hat, ornamented with its paste butterfly, she had chosen so carefully, such a rush of tenderness for the forlorn child, as she appeared to him, invaded Zeid that it was all he could do not to gather her at once into his arms—heedless of existing engagements or barriers—and call her every endearing name that he could think of. He had to pull himself together very sternly not to make a thorough fool of himself.

But it was with real gentleness that he started out to comfort her. While Charlotte, realizing with alarm that any moment might bring back an amazed and questioning Mr. Kingsbury, did her best to gulp back her tears and regain some measure of decent self-control.

"But," said Zeid, leaning over the back of the sofa to which he had led her, as he arranged cushions carefully behind her head and made her take off her hat, "*ne pleurez pas ainsi, petite ange. Tu me fais mal au cœur.* Besides," he added, patting her on the shoulder, "this is no way to start in France. Here one enjoys oneself. Come, come, smile at me, Rapunzel."

A very wavering example was exhibited.

"That's much better," said he, "but what an absurd handkerchief. A butterfly could not blow its nose upon it, if it had one. Why, it's wet through with your tears already. Here, you'd better take mine."

"I really don't know why I was so silly," said Charlotte, receiving at his hands a large, checked sample of silk. And mopping her eyes.

"Now some powder on the nose," he suggested, and brought to her her scarlet leather hand-bag. "Reparations must be made."

"It was too ridiculous——"

"Over-tired, my angel," he interrupted her, lolling against the mantel-piece and watching her remove the traces of the late tempest with unconcealed interest. "A little more powder under that eye—it is still damp there."

Charlotte could not help laughing.

"That is better," said he in a tone of relief. "Yes, you look ravishing now. No signs of the storm left. But there is no reason to be ashamed of it. Very probably you've had nothing to eat for hours. That plays havoc with one. I wish I could get you a sandwich and a glass of wine——"

He looked vaguely around the room, Charlotte supposed for a bell; but taking it for granted that he could only be a visitor in that house, she hastened to announce that the cure was complete and she was herself again.

"Without sandwiches, eh?"

"Yes," said Charlotte, firmly. "And I never asked you how you were."

"Splendid," he said, "all bones mended and the head as good or bad as ever. I wrote a long letter about it to Kirsty the other day. I wish I could say the same of my heart," he ended, with a sidelong glance at her.

Still shaken after her recent loss of self-control, Charlotte refused to take up this challenge. For the moment she felt quite unequal to any fencing or badinage, however frivolous.

"I wish my guardian would come back," she said. "The longer I have to wait to see Madame de Dasulas, the more nervous I shall get. Then I shall say exactly the wrong thing. And probably she won't like me at all."

"Oh, nonsense," he replied. "You needn't be afraid of her—she's a darling. Now if it were her sister—whew!"

He whistled shrilly, and then broke off to inquire what guardian it was of Charlotte's that she was then awaiting.

"Why, Mr. Kingsbury. He brought me over."

"Oh, he is your guardian."

"Yes, he was an old friend of my father's."

"And he is here, in Paris?"

"In this house, with Madame de Dasulas, at this very moment somewhere upstairs——" She broke off suddenly to exclaim, "There he is, outside in the hall. I can hear his voice."

Forgetting everything else in the relief of hearing Jeremiah's bluff tones, at last, haranguing someone in the hall outside, she jumped up from the sofa and ran to the door. Then leaving it a little bit open, she passed out.

Mr. Kingsbury was talking, it seemed, to Thérèse de la Motte, of all people, who had apparently been present at the interview with Madame de Dasulas.

"Why, Thérèse," cried Charlotte, eagerly, "I thought you had gone back to Methpeden. Do you mean to say the holidays are not yet over?"

From his place by the chimney piece, Zeid watched her talking animatedly to the woman, who had once, in days gone by, been his very indulgent governess, and then turn to her guardian.

"It's time I was off," he muttered, and noiselessly withdrew, stepping quickly out of the nearest open window and disappearing at once round a corner.

When Charlotte returned for the hat she had forgotten, before accompanying Thérèse to the comfortable room she was to occupy on the fourth floor, facing the street, for the next few weeks, the library was empty.

As it turned out, she need not have felt any apprehension at having to meet her employer then. For Madame de Dasulas was laid up with a sharp attack of lumbago, and it was some days before she was well enough to send for Charlotte after all.

CHAPTER 6

CHARLOTTE had been a member of the tranquil household in the Rue de Bellechasse for rather over two weeks before chance, as she supposed, at the time and for long afterwards, threw across her path the elusive and disturbing Zeid.

During those first serene days of her stay in Paris owing to the continued illness of Madame de Dasulas she had little with which to occupy the lazily passing hours. Most of her secretarial duties had of course to wait upon the invalid's recovery, and Charlotte, left therefore entirely to her own resources, was exceedingly glad of the friendly companionship of Thérèse de la Motte, who, in these last weeks of her holidays, constituted herself an able guide for the nonce, and escorted a willing follower day after day on long pilgrimages to all the historic sights of Paris. Even going so far, one fine morning, as to allow Charlotte to persuade her into a Cook's day trip to Fontainebleau. The château, it must be confessed, made upon Charlotte but a confused impression of endless chains of gorgeous galleries and great rooms still magnificent in their desertion and silence.

"There's one thing you never could have called these Kings of France," said she, "and that is—bourgeois."

"No," said Thérèse, "they were courageous, and rich, and indifferent and isolated, as the great must always be. Circumstances took their crowns from them in the end, but they still remained royal. And therefore had to be torn down sooner or later by the envious, I suppose."

Their lunch at an hotel which had once been the residence

of Madame de Sévigné made a much more satisfactory impression on Charlotte, who was by the time she sat down to it extremely hungry; after driving twenty-four miles at least, and visiting Barbizon en route. During the drive home, once out of the forest, she dozed most of the way along the endless paved road, cut straight as a die through flat country.

Once she said apologetically to Thérèse: "I'm afraid I'm being very bad company, but you must forgive me," and then went to sleep again.

It was the next day that she began to hear a good deal of talk, from one person and another in the house, of that handsome n hew of Madame de Dasulas, who was at once a French citizen, a cavalry officer, and a ruler over turbulent tribes in the mountain fastnesses of Morocco.

Simone, who was elderly and could relate fascinating incidents in the girlhood of her mistress, to whom she was devoted, had also known him from babyhood and was particularly loud in his praises.

Pondering upon one conversation and another centering round this dashing individual, Charlotte came to the conclusion that the immaculate hero everyone about her so openly worshipped was in reality a very cold, selfish, terribly spoilt and possibly even somewhat unprincipled young man.

There was one story of his having wrested from an obnoxious cousin a favorite pony by a trick, which bore in Charlotte's opinion all the signs of a bullying and envious nature. But she did not quite dare to remark this to Simone, who clearly looked on the transaction with sympathetic pride for her darling, and had nothing but derisive contempt for the loser in the dubious proceeding.

Charlotte, wrapping herself about in a cloak of self-conscious insularity and race prejudice, thanked Heaven she was never likely to fall a victim to his fascinations. Complacently she told herself she would first of all never stand

such airs of superior possession in any man, or then bear with patience the careless, lukewarm method which rumor had it he was employing to win his future wife.

From the bottom of a naturally rebellious heart Charlotte pitied the poor, spineless creature. Doomed to such a life of meekness and self-abnegation—and that, too, in the wildest and most remote part of a desert world, with so arrogant a lord to order her goings.

Charlotte, tossing her head, assured herself with flashing eyes that such treatment would never do with her.

"Why, Thèrése," said she, on hearing a day or two after that for the last few weeks this Admirable Crichton and paragon of all the Gallic graces had been showing a lamentable lack of warmth over the proposed alliance, and the bride chosen by his mother to love, honor and obey him in a not very remote future, "I can't imagine any modern girl standing it. Fancy allowing other people to choose your husband for you in the first place. Imagine me at the beck and call of a heartless, indifferent wretch like that. It's not good enough—life's too short."

Charlotte was terribly decided.

"Well," said Thérèse with a sudden chuckle, "luckily for Zeid he is not going to marry you, Charlotte," and she continued to laugh good-humoredly for some seconds. Finding great entertainment in the idea.

Charlotte drew herself up.

"I shall at least expect my husband to worship at my shrine—not I at his," she said rather offendedly.

Again Thérèse laughed.

"That would be a hopeless relationship for Zeid," she said, and then added irritatingly: "But you are young, Charlotte. One of these days you will learn that few men worship their wives. They are apt to get too used to them too soon."

Then, while admitting that her idol could be exasperating at times, and very certainly was used to carrying all

situations off in his own high-handed, careless manner, reminded the aggravated Charlotte that after all she had not as yet met him.

"But I know exactly the kind of conceited being he is."

Perceiving then that the subject of Zeid and his doings annoyed Charlotte, though why she could not fathom—that it was on general principles she never could have credited—Thérèse de la Motte, with all a Frenchwoman's tact, changed it for one more congenial to her companion.

After all, why should this very provincial, ill-educated little English girl be interested in the affairs of the only son of Mohammed Ali and Laure Davonier? And though she was dying to impart to some one as outside home politics as Charlotte her lately aroused suspicion that he must have recently fallen a victim to some pretty, strange face, and was probably in consequence too full of alluring dreams of love and conquest to be able to concentrate on a mere marriage of convenience, Thérèse allowed the confidence to remain unuttered. What is not given words cannot be handed about like refreshments, she reflected. Meditating further tolerantly that Zeid, being young, wealthy, and of an amazing attractiveness, would be sure to trouble more than one woman's heart before he came to the end of the road. And it would indeed be astonishing if, with his heredity, he did not fall in and out of love a dozen times before he settled down to eat his matrimonial cake and started to govern his people.

But in this estimate of his character Thérèse was wrong, for Zeid loved but one woman to the end of his days.

Meanwhile his mother, the Princess Mohammed Ali, would continue to hold the reins of government in far Morocco, and drive an almost impossible team of mountain chiefs with a wily cunning that outmatched even their suspicious brains. As she had done any time in the last fourteen years. For Mohammed Ali, who had married her and loved her sister, had always supremely valued in Laure Davonier a rare and sympathetic understanding of the

Oriental mind and the problems of the East which was amazing in a Western woman, and more so in one of her nationality. She had been from the first extraordinarily clever in solving for him those difficulties which religion and race made so acute whenever he wished to introduce innovations in local hygiene or medicine. Customs she would never allow him to meddle with. But now he was dead, and although no one yet knew it Zeid was determined to really reign in his stead before long. Meanwhile he hid his aspirations towards the betterment of his people's conditions, and to all appearance was still the crack-brained, harum-scarum, headstrong boy he had actually been only six months before.

Speculating more and more on where he could have encountered this mysterious charmer—so certain was she that he wooed one—Thérèse vainly tried to figure out who this shadowy third in his affairs could be. But that it was the unconscious Charlotte who was so seriously disturbing his peace of mind, she was very far from guessing. As far as Charlotte herself was from suspecting that the prankish Nicolas Vaurien and the hard, reckless Prince Zeid were one.

Oddly enough, since the afternoon of her arrival, she had not entered the library, so full had her days been of sightseeing, and her evenings of entertainment, and no one had suggested that the photograph on the table beside the couch, in its silver frame, held the key to all perplexities.

Charlotte was in any case, however, soon to make that unwelcome discovery.

She was walking with Thérèse one afternoon across the gardens of the Tuileries, bound on a shopping errand near the Madeleine for Madame de Dasulas, and, that concluded, a quiet tea in some tea-shop close by, when whom should they both perceive almost at the same moment in the middle distance, striding briskly towards them along the gravel path, but Zeid himself—resplendent in his smartest uniform.

"*Tiens,*" cried Mademoiselle de la Motte, "at last you'll

meet him. There he comes towards us, Charlotte. Truly one must admit he makes a superb figure."

"Who?" demanded Charlotte, whose heart was beating more rapidly than she liked at the approach of the already smiling Nicolas, as she still imagined him to be. Afterwards she never understood how she could have been so obtuse as not to put so obvious a two and two together before.

"Who? Why, our Prince Zeid, of course. Madame's favorite nephew. He is then back from visiting the Davoniers—the family of his bride-to-be."

Thus did Thérèse spill the entire load of beans.

The revelation had the effect of an earthquake upon Charlotte, as in the ruins of her most secret dreams she stood white-faced and shaking with a furious anger. Apart from the mad rage which consumed her that he should have dared to play so outrageous a trick upon her, she experienced a hideously jealous pang at the reflection that, even when he had been most genuinely tender of her distress and fatigue, in that hour of coming to a strange city and an unknown people, he should have been on the point of departure to that paragon of a Gabrielle he had praised so to her. A little cat, Charlotte was certain. And therefore no more than he deserved. But even as she told herself this, a choking and desperate misery fought with a cold hatred for mastery of her soul. For Charlotte was always, except in one instance, to the end of her days, a better hater than a lover.

"Yes," continued Thérèse, as he came within ear-shot, "here he is at last—our very dear Zeid."

"And there is my equally dear Thérèse," he returned warmly, saluting her and coming to a halt squarely before them both. "Who taught me everything I know—worth knowing."

And he bent and kissed her outstretched hand engagingly.

"Oh, la, la," mocked Thérèse, "I make no pretensions to having taught you anything useful, but your alphabet in

three or four languages, and perhaps a few easy sums, and a modicum of geography and history."

"And half the time I wore your patience to tatters."

"Still they were pleasant days in your father's ancient feudal castle beyond Marrakesch. One was very well out of the world there."

Having given her, as he imagined, time to digest this discovery that he and Nicolas Vaurien were one and the same person, Zeid turned eagerly to Charlotte, words that might have changed the whole course of future events already on his lips, only to be frozen silent with a look which proclaimed icily to the world that she had never set eyes on this person before, and was not now at all thrilled to make his acquaintance.

Thérèse, unobservant of the tenseness of the atmosphere, because she knew no reason for them to be acquainted, presented each to each.

Zeid made Charlotte a most magnificent bow.

"I am honored—far above my deserts," he murmured.

But he looked both puzzled and hurt.

Nevertheless, after some general conversation in which Charlotte most frigidly joined, he insisted, instead of leaving them as she had hoped he would, on turning with them and recrossing the gardens as though he had nothing to do in the world but make himself agreeable to his old governess and a perfect stranger.

It was this engaging quality in him that endeared him so to Thérèse.

Chatting ridiculously of everything that entered his head, he still now and then shot an inquiring glance over Thérèse's hat—for she was nearly a head shorter than he—at the sulking Charlotte.

Finally when they were about to cross the Rue de Rivoli by the Tennis Court, he came deliberately between them.

"Thus only can I aid you both," he announced.

"Thank you, I can get over the road quite well by myself," muttered Charlotte morosely.

"But not in Paris," he rejoined firmly. "Our traffic is still very untamed, and strange in its methods. Did you never hear of the taxi driver, who, being congratulated on having avoided miraculously running down a pedestrian, remarked, *"Ça, c'est rien*—it would have been my thirteenth this month."

Charlotte refused to be in the least propitiated.

"Your gendarmes are about as much use as a sick headache," she said rudely.

"But not so painful to the eyes," he rejoined easily.

Mademoiselle de la Motte, who had achieved the opposite pavement a shade sooner than they had, turned. "Now, Zeid," she began, with all the authority of the old and well-loved preceptress, "you must run about your business. We are going shopping."

This ultimatum made him raise his eyebrows in surprise, for usually Thérèse was only too anxious to retain him by her side as long as he remained interested or amused.

But seeing that her judicial air did not weaken, and that she remained standing on the edge of the pavement waiting for him to say good-bye, he said, half coaxingly, "And I was going to ask you and Miss Manisty to let me take you to the Ritz for tea."

Thérèse shot a doubtful look at Charlotte; but, perceiving with some inward astonishment that a blankness as of the whitewashed outer wall of a Moroccan residence was depicted upon her usually expressive features, decided to remain firm.

"Certainly not," she cried, "the Ritz, dressed as we are. Of what are you thinking, Zeid? We are not nearly smart enough."

Zeid stared at Charlotte, and then laughed. His patience was beginning to wear thin.

"A ridiculous excuse," he remarked. "I bet anything you were going to *'fif' o'cloquer'* somewhere."

Charlotte returned his mocking and hostile glance with one as deadly.

"We were, and are, going to some small bakery," she declared, "where you could never come, for you are so much too smart."

Thereafter Zeid walked to his club the prey of a great desperation, and full of a wild resolve to teach his charmer a lesson before long. While Charlotte drank her tea with a gleam in her eyes that puzzled the innocent Thérèse a good deal.

"What is the matter with you, this afternoon?" she ventured to ask at last. "You look, my dear, a little like the Medusa. Precisely the same set expression adorns your face at this instant."

Charlotte continued to glare uncompromisingly at the racks of fresh bread and rolls which decorated the wall opposite her. "And I feel like her, too," she replied viciously, continuing with a lamentable lack of truth, "because I had a letter from George Painter today. And if you knew how I detest him!"

Her friend laughed.

"Ah, these young men," she sighed, "how they all annoy us with their attentions at first, and how they all upset us by taking no notice of us at the last. It is when you are my age that you realize the dullness of a life entirely bereft of male admiration."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, I'm sick of them all—the wretches don't even exist for me."

But in making this over-harsh though general statement Charlotte overshot the mark. For her heart every hour told her far otherwise about one baffling creature.

2.

A couple of days later Mademoiselle de la Motte, after taking an affectionate leave of the whole household in the Rue de Bellechasse, returned to England. There to undertake for another three months the diligent imparting of the

French tongue to the young daughters of Britain. And at the very hour that she was sailing upon the salt sea, Monsieur de Brancas sat opposite Madame de Dasulas at the lunch table, confiding to her somewhat amusedly precisely what Thérèse had already divined—that Zeid was indubitably a victim of the fever of love. And, moreover, had it badly.

A great deal would Thérèse have given, had she known of this, to have been an intelligent fly upon the wall in their vicinity. But besides Felix, who waited discreetly on them, there was nobody present to hear their conversation. And he was as deep as a well for silence and the strictest minding of his own affairs. Charlotte, too, had been forced to go out with a newly arrived and clamorous George Painter, who was bent on showing her a good time in some cheap restaurant of the Latin Quarter. By now they were far up the Boulevard Raspail, walking rapidly; while George was doing all the talking.

Madame de Dasulas, still cumbered with a stick when she wished to move about her house, had announced to her guest that she intended leaving for Morocco almost immediately. It was this intimation which made Monsieur de Brancas decide to break the confidence so recently made him by an utterly miserable Zeid. And probably, knowing his old friend as well as he did, he was quite right. For she was a woman whom men always liked and trusted, but women rarely. Her own sex finding in her a barely concealed intolerance of all those things which most interested them. This they could not forgive. Especially when she added to it a toleration and understanding of the elastic standards of men which often appeared to them little short of criminal. Morals always seemed to her of so much less importance than manners.

As she sat opposite him, a shade paler than usual, and worn still, after her recent illness, her iron-gray hair brushed back from a high forehead, still supporting, to the secret entertainment of her friends, a flimsy widow's cap of mull,

fashioned in the style that Mary Stuart made so popular in a world that finally bereft her of the wherewithal on which to set it, he could not help complimenting her on her looks.

Out of a faded but still classically featured face shone a pair of almost girlishly young eyes. Every time Claude de Brancas met their serene gaze he was conscious of a slight sensation of astonishment. At sixty, and remembering what shocks Marie de Dasulas had received at the hands of fate, it was really surprising. For the rest she possessed a singularly melodious voice, was short and stout yet managed always to retain that indescribable air of the great world certain women possess, no matter what their known ancestry, in all her movements as well as in her not altogether fashionable dress.

She was saying, "Is it possible that what you tell me is true—Zeid in love? Just now that will be a real complication." And she sighed lightly.

"I suppose I should not be telling you this. You are quite the last person Zeid expected to know of it."

"It is, you know, quite safe with me."

"And after all, you are the one perhaps most concerned."

"But who could it be?"

Like Thérèse, she was very much puzzled.

"As far as I could make out," he returned, "after all the poetry was over, the young lady appears to be some perfectly impossible being he encountered on one or two occasions in England, while he was laid up after that motor smash of his."

Madame de Dasulas laughed softly.

"I do hope that at least she was not a barmaid—to fall in love with a barmaid seems to be the height of daring amongst the young blades of that country."

"No, she is not a barmaid—that I can promise you."

"And yet you know nothing about her? Zeid has always been so reticent about the whole episode of his accident. And the sudden death of his father seemed to make it so

utterly unimportant that I never bothered to ask him much about it when he returned here. And yet I don't know that I am as surprised as I might be—I, too, have noticed little signs and symptoms."

"But I took a pretty strong tone with him—things being as they are."

Madame de Dasulas nodded.

"You are always so good to us all, Claude. And Zeid is really attached to you."

"But," he continued, a trifle impatiently, "he is a boy, after all, when it comes to the emotions, I suppose. Therefore he talked a great deal of quixotic and impulsive nonsense. Naturally the young lady was more desirable and far more beautiful than——"

"Venus?" she suggested.

"No, my dear Marie, quite surprisingly she seems to have been much more of a Diana—cold and chaste to a fault. Perhaps rather to be regretted than otherwise that she was so unyielding. For to Zeid she naturally appeared the more provocative. He complained most bitterly of the correctitude of her behavior. However, with time and distance—let us remember very cheerfully that the Channel rolls steadily between them now—we may hope that a cure may be effected."

"Fortunately his cousin understands him perfectly," said Madame de Dasulas. "Gabrielle is one of the most sensible girls I know."

"Also one of the prettiest—and that will help, probably. When does she come to you?"

"As soon as we are settled in Tangiers. Then about Christmas, if all goes well, they will be married according to our church, privately, and later according to the custom of the race over which destiny made Zeid a ruler."

"Ah," replied Claude de Brancas thoughtfully, "your nephew does not yet know how lucky he is in the choice made for him. For I think that Mademoiselle Gabrielle

will bear the loneliness and restriction of such a life better than most."

Madame de Dasulas looked across the table at him, over the bowl of flowers in the center of it, and began to laugh again.

"Lonely—Gabrielle? With Zeid as a lover? Oh, my dear Claude, how can you say that when we all know how delightful and unspoiled he is underneath all his funny, boyish ways? Besides, he has not run about after ordinary girls—as so many of his contemporaries do and have done. He will come to his marriage with all the romance of a first passion. And that is as it should be."

"Now?"

"Let us hope so. Oh, yes, this fancy will pass. As it will have nothing to feed upon. A diet of absence is nearly always the best cure for these things. And I can admit to you," she told him, "I would not wish a more entrancing, dream-beset, unusual kind of marriage if I were a young girl."

"Well, well," said he, thoughtfully, "the young people will certainly have every advantage."

"After all," pursued Marie de Dasulas, "what is it we women desire most in husband or lover? That he should occupy himself completely with us—at least for the first years. Then when the children arrive, matters often change, I admit."

"And there, you would say, in the desert exist few distractions."

Monsieur de Brancas stroked his beard after that for some moments in silence, watching her with an expression on his face which denoted a certain mood of nervousness or apprehension in him. But the comings and goings of Felix with fresh plates and the final course of their lunch served so completely to divert her attention, both from the subject of Zeid's supposed love affair and from himself, that it was with the most complete astonishment that, after they were alone once more, she heard him ask hesitatingly, "What

would you say, my dear Marie, if I were to tell you that I, too, am thinking of matrimony?"

She looked quite as astounded for the moment as he had expected.

"You!" she cried, laying down the silver knife with which she was peeling a pear.

"Yes—even I. The confirmed misogynist and bachelor."

"A thousand congratulations," said Marie de Dasulas, warmly, adding with a twinkle in her eye, "After all, Claude, it is quite time. We all know you would make the most indulgent of husbands. Who is she? Do I know her? You must certainly bring her to see me at once."

Claude de Brancas sat back in his chair.

"Yes—you know her," he said in a tone which struck her as curious.

"Do I know her well?"

"I should hardly think that."

She tried another tack, he seemed so oddly non-committal.

"Is she pretty?"

"That is a real woman's question. Yes, a face like a flower, chère Madame."

"Any money? Not that you really need a wife with a big dot. Though it is always good for the woman to bring even a little with her."

"I should rather fancy not," he returned after a moment, still appearing to her oddly hesitant and even mysterious of manner. But being wise, she took no notice of his enigmatical air. If there were some unusual circumstance in the engagement, she supposed he would impart it to her if he meant to.

"No, on the whole, I should imagine the child to be more or less penniless."

She caught him up on this. "But don't you know? You merely imagine?" Her expression of wonder was too much for him and he began to laugh.

"Well, the fact is, she is not of our nation."

The murder was out, then.

This was quite the last piece of news she had expected to hear from Claude, who was so typical a Frenchman.

"But, my dear," she cried quickly, "are you sure that is wise? Forgive me for suggesting it, but you seem to me to lack caution here. At your age—nearly forty as you are —forgive me again if I speak too plainly,—would not a French girl be a better choice? Oh, I may seem nothing but an interfering old woman—but I have known you from a boy."

She stopped, openly distressed and apprehensive. And knowing what he yet had to confess to her, he himself was not too easy in his mind.

"Yes, I remember at ten years old proposing to you, Marie," he returned lightly. "Although you were more than double my age then."

"Do you think marriage with a foreigner is ever very successful?" she pursued anxiously. "Training, ideas, traditions, habits, are all so different."

"She would find me very patient."

"I don't doubt that."

"Besides, Marie, she is so young, so fresh, and I think unspoilt as yet by too much contact with the world." He hesitated, and then added, half to himself, "And in my heart I have often made a picture to myself of the woman I should best like to be the mother of my son."

Marie de Dasulas held out an impulsive hand.

"Say no more—if she loves you. My dear Claude, you know you can count on me," she told him softly as he took her hand and, raising it to his lips, kissed her fingers lightly.

"You are a well of goodness, Marie," he exclaimed, and still he seemed to hesitate. "But when I tell you who she is, you may most heartily disapprove of my choice," he added after a moment.

This last sentence again roused all of her curiosity.

"Come, Claude, who is she?" she demanded.

Monsieur de Brancas looked at her steadily. The mo-

ment he had feared had come. Now he could no longer delay the disclosure, or prepare her any more for it. He must acknowledge what a curious trick it was that destiny had played him in these riper and more experienced years of his.

"It is your new secretary," he said, a trifle more sonorously than he needed to have spoken.

She remained there staring at him for quite some time.

"Mon Dieu!" she said at last.

"And I have only spoken to her on one occasion, too," he continued.

"But where?"

"On the train the other day coming from Calais—I first noticed her on the boat at Dover. Do I bore you with these details?"

"No—no."

But her air of profound mystification continued to grow rather than diminish.

"She was standing at the rail—a lovely child, I thought her—watching the baggage come aboard. Not a very romantic operation, certainly. But she had an air so aloof, was so delicate a young creature in these striding days—one would swear some little remote princess of a fairy tale—that literally, my dear Marie, I could not take my eyes from her. I assure you I felt as lovesick as the boy of eighteen I should have been. Calf love, and all its unexplained growing pains were as nothing to the pang I felt."

He tried to carry it all off with a laugh, but she could easily perceive how strongly he had been moved. Charlotte had already caused, and was to continue to cause him endless trouble and pain.

"My poor Claude—and she?"

"Was of course quite unconscious of me—dreaming probably of some absurd boy of her own fancy. But I could, given the chance, teach her to love me, I think."

"Little Charlotte Manisty! So self-sufficient and untried.

For she is that, Claude. Though I believe the child to possess a more affectionate nature than she thinks she does. And you are quite serious?"

"Quite."

"And you mean to marry this quite commonplace little person with a lovely face, a charming figure, and very little education. Oh, I grant you all the charm and youth. But she has no knowledge of life. And as far as I can see very little desire to learn. Yes, that is true, too. And she is minus money or relatives—important ones, I mean. Naturally she has a family—but they are very ordinary, I should say. Quite of the bourgeoisie."

"As to that, I have enough of both," he reminded her.

"Well, well," said Marie de Dasulas, "you have certainly given me two shocks today. First Zeid—and now you."

"But you will not be against me?" he asked anxiously. "I know it must all seem absurdly sudden. But I vow to you, Marie, I have never met in my life before a woman who obsessed my every thought as she has done for the past three weeks."

He looked so haggard that she felt genuinely grieved for all the mental disturbance he had been enduring.

Still she felt bound to say, "It may pass away, this feeling. Such violent fancies often do, Claude." But she could see he had entirely forgotten his attitude towards Zeid in almost precisely the same circumstances.

"Not this one."

He was so very positive that, meeting his sombre eyes, his old friend decided she must take this very annoying affair quite seriously. Rapidly she decided that it would not be of the slightest use to send the girl away. He would only follow her. And, after all, she as yet seemed to know nothing of the feelings she had aroused in him. Or did she? Madame de Dasulas felt that she must find out at once.

"But it may pass, this feeling," she repeated.

"Never," said he.

"Does she know anything about it?" In spite of all

she could do, her tone was distinctly crisp. He regarded her mournfully.

"How could she? To her I am still the veriest stranger, introduced to her by her guardian. With whom she talked nothings for a couple of hours on the journey to Paris. Yet one day she must, she shall be my wife."

Marie de Dasulas gripped her stick, which was resting against the arm of her chair. "Come," she said, "help me into my own sitting-room, I am still so ridiculously lame; and there we will discuss this affair more carefully. You and I do not want to be overheard by the wrong person. Much damage might result from that. And you shall tell me in what way I can help you. Certainly the child should be extremely flattered at having won the homage of so celebrated a man as Claude de Brancas."

3.

George Painter had finally trundled himself and Charlotte into the upstairs dining-room of the Café de la Rotonde.

Here they sat, facing each other at a small table, eating an omelette and drinking coffee. As usual, after explaining at great length to a very inattentive hearer his plans, in the minutest detail, for the next few weeks, he turned the spotlight of his attention upon Charlotte's own affairs.

"I suppose you are up in all the news from home," he began, tentatively.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"I've had exactly three letters," she replied indifferently. "One each week from Mother. But you know what she is —they were all about the garden, most of them."

"Hasn't Nettie written to you?"

"She sent me a picture post-card."

George said this was a shame, quite loudly.

"Oh, I don't know," replied Charlotte, "what news could

there be? They all go on day after day, just the same. Now of course Paul and Nettie are back at their schools."

Without the slightest preamble, George announced that Nettie had informed him Jeremiah Kingsbury was going to marry Mrs. Manisty.

Charlotte was openly skeptical.

"That's perfect nonsense," she cried.

George was not so sure.

"He went down to see her the moment he got back."

"To tell her about me, most probably. You forget he brought me over here, and then stayed for three or four days at the house of Madame de Dasulas."

"I doubt that—I believe there's something in it. Nettie said they were as thick as thieves."

Charlotte looked annoyed.

"Oh, George, you have such a genius for spoiling a pleasant outing," she complained.

But he was so full of home news, which he began to perceive had not yet reached her, that he took no notice of her irritation.

"And that's not the only bit of news, either."

"I don't call that news, I call that gossip."

"What I'm going to tell you now isn't gossip."

"Well, what is it?"

He drew a long breath.

"Kirsty McLeod has been offered a most important medical post abroad."

This interested Charlotte a good deal more.

"Oh, where?" she asked.

But on this point he was far from sure. Mrs. Adams had told him she was to go to Vienna first for some special course which had been made a condition of her accepting the post offered her. But her ultimate destination was vague as yet. It seemed that it all depended on how she passed certain extremely hard tests in Vienna. For she was to be the head of a big organization in the long run, if all turned out well.

"That will be nice for Kirsty," said Charlotte thoughtfully. "There may be some chance of her forgetting at last about that boy, who was killed in the war, she was engaged to."

"The Lord have mercy on you, Charlotte," cried George Painter, "what awful grammar! And yet I think you were educated at one of our first schools."

This distinctly satirical banter had the most unfortunate effect on Charlotte's temper, and she flushed up angrily.

"What do you want to make fun of my grammar for?" she demanded hotly. "I'm sure I never bother about yours. Or dream of telling you what I really think about those cheap articles and idiotic stories you write——"

"They sell," he grinned. "And I never did believe in art for art's sake, and Batik scarves for wear to lend local color. But anyway, thanks for them few kind and encouraging words, lady. We aim to please."

"And, let me tell you, before you attack my parts of speech, you might just as well look at home," pursued Charlotte severely. "There's a lot of the mote and beam business about you, George."

At the conclusion of this homily, he threw back his head to laugh with unrestrained heartiness. Charlotte always amused him vastly when she took him to task. She reminded him of nothing so much as of a small Persian kitten that had once belonged to his mother, who was wont to spend her leisure moments in rushing violently at their collie dog. Who, receiving the fury of the attack with bored inattention, generally put an end to it, at last, by picking his assailant up in his mouth and depositing her with the utmost care in an adjacent roomy waste-paper basket, there to remain till some member of the family retrieved her. Charlotte's moods of displeasure had much the same mental effect on him.

"But it wasn't your parts of speech, Miss Manisty, I was attacking," he explained, "it was your syntax."

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"I should worry and lose a feather," she remarked loftily. "Anyway, what is syntax?"

The groan this question wrung from him could be plainly heard at a distance of no less than six tables beyond theirs. Although since they had been sitting there the room had filled up with its usual crowd of strange-looking habitués. Artists with long beards, a good many of the writing fraternity, as well as a leavening of students, eccentric in dress as well as habits. But in spite of the noise of conversation which filled the place, several of their nearer neighbors turned to stare and smile at the pretty girl who was apparently causing her companion such acute pain.

"I wish you wouldn't make yourself so conspicuous," she reproved.

George clutched his brow.

"One of these days you'll unsettle my reason. What did you learn at your school?" he asked her. "Syntax, my poor fish, is the due arrangement of words in sentences. Any dictionary will tell you that." He leant across the table to add impressively, "And in their proper relation to each other. That's the rub for the aspiring stylist. And that, let me point out to you, my lovely and ivory-domed Charlotte, is precisely where you get out of the Rolls-Royce and walk on your flat feet."

"My feet are not flat," she returned indignantly.

"I was dealing in metaphor," said he.

"You were talking nonsense," she retorted "Besides, why should I bother my head about this syntax effect—I don't write books and I don't want to."

"For which indeed Heaven be thanked," he returned piously. "But you talk, my girl. And I should also like to remind you that you have been amassing, perhaps at no very great rate, but still amassing, good Treasury notes teaching the young until very recently."

"Amassing!" cried Charlotte, scornfully, continuing to look very much put out. This was so exactly the kind of facetious gibing talk George and his cronies so loved to

unload on their circle of intimates, and which she had always found so pointless and detestable. To make stupid, blatant ridicule of everything and everybody, nobody's shortcomings or foibles to be let alone—that was too distressing. And caused her inwardly a severe mental strain. She did so want always to break out into a real diatribe against this singularly shallow form of a wit they all seemed to think so scintillating.

"But I never taught words—grammar—you oaf," she pointed out with a light of triumph in her eyes that the verbal retort should be for once hers. After all, George was a stupid, superficial creature. "It was music I taught."

"What's the difference?" he demanded. "Have you never heard of progressions—sequences—phrases in music? That's like syntax."

Charlotte regarded him very stonily.

"Did I come out with you to be lectured?" she asked. "I suppose you haven't the slightest idea how boring you are."

George laughed good-humoredly. The tart speeches Charlotte flung at him never made the slightest dent in his complacent self-esteem.

"All right. Let's talk about something else," he replied.

"Yes, do," said Charlotte.

In order to be on the safe side he now suggested, as he helped her liberally to a second portion of *omelette aux fines herbes,* that she should choose a subject. The burden of discovering a suitable topic thus unceremoniously cast upon her, Charlotte remained silent for some moments.

Then she said at last, reverting without preamble to an earlier theme, "I do hope that Mother won't take old Jeremiah, if he asks her."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't bear it—he's so stuffy. He'd be very trying as a stepfather, I'm certain."

"Why—doesn't he like you?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," she said indifferently. "But he's

the kind of man who would want to rule us all for our own good. He would want us to live our lives just as he had planned them. Theoretically it might be quite a good plan, but practically we should all end by hanging ourselves, or running away."

George dismissed the first suggestion as out of the question, knowing the Manisty family as well as he did, but the second was possible.

"But where would you run to?" he asked.

"How should I know?" said Charlotte. "Yes, I do—I know what I should do. I should get married at once. Then I wouldn't be bothered with any of them."

George grinned.

"That's the most sensible remark you've made for weeks," he said. "But why wait? Why not try me now? Never procrastinate over these important decisions."

But Charlotte laughed and utterly refused to treat his proposal at all seriously.

"At present I'm quite comfortable," she informed him. "Also you seem to forget that neither of us have any money, George. And I certainly intend to go to Morocco with Madame de Dasulas, no matter what Mother may end by doing."

The mention of this outlandish part of the world, to her secret relief, set him off on another tack. He had not really expected her to leap into his arms when he suggested they should try matrimony, and privately her matter-of-fact reception of the extravagant invitation had encouraged him a good deal. At least she had not snapped his head off, and therein lay cheering food for reflection, he considered. Later he would have a more serious, defined conversation with her on the interesting subject.

It was at this point when—in order to bridge over the slightly self-conscious silence which had suddenly appeared likely to envelop them—he was explaining elaborately to her the situation in the hinterland of Morocco—as being a safe topic for both of them—that Zeid came into

the Café de la Rotonde and the upstairs dining-room thereof.

He was quite alone, in the lightest of tweed suits, with a hat squashed over his eyes, and looked as though he had recently suffered a good many sleepless nights.

George was the first to notice him as he flung his headgear on a chair and sat down at a still empty table in the middle of the room. Charlotte, having her back turned towards him, had not observed his entrance.

"There," said George with a jerk of his head in the general direction of the unconscious Zeid, "sits a man on whom the French Colonial Office depends a good deal."

"How jolly for him," said Charlotte.

George continued.

"He is very rich; they say his family claims to be descended from the Prophet; and in some ways his people have been the most influential and loved of all those who rule or have ruled over Berber tribes."

Not connecting these remarks with anything that had gone before—indeed she had been giving George but a most perfunctory attention—Charlotte did not bother to turn her head.

"Really?" said she indifferently, for after all one Frenchman seemed very like another to her as yet. They all had a tendency to be bearded.

George sighed. He was beginning to find Charlotte unusually hard to amuse.

"Yes—but I suppose that doesn't interest you either."

Quite suddenly she began to feel she was treating him rather scurvily. Charlotte so often suffered from these changes of heart towards people she really disliked. After all he was doing his best. It wasn't his fault that nothing he could ever do would really hold her attention for long.

"Not in the least," said she, but the smile with which she indulged him robbed the four words of all their sting.

"And yet you're almost sure to meet him in Tangiers," he continued, thus encouraged. "I suppose you can't have

come across him yet. But his mother, I was told yesterday, is a sister of your Madame de Dasulas."

This was an entirely different pair of shoes. Charlotte now had much ado to remain the listless creature of a moment before. With extreme caution she ventured a rapid glance in the direction George had indicated earlier. Yes, there sat Zeid. And talking animatedly to a waiter in the slangiest French. Apparently he knew him intimately, and, to the amusement of those about them, they were making a comic history of the menu. Charlotte was conscious of a jealous pang that he could seem so unconcerned and contented with life when she was suffering so acutely. Finally, with an order that caused a good deal of mirth in their vicinity, the waiter moved away and Zeid relapsed into thought.

George continued blithely.

"I must meet him soon. I ought to get an interview out of him if I can. If his father, Mohammed Ali, hadn't been killed last July, I'd have probably found it easy enough. Peter could have helped me there."

"Why was he killed?" asked Charlotte, suddenly realizing with sharp surprise that nobody in the Dasulas household had mentioned to her the fact that Zeid had been so recently bereft of a parent. Nor did either he or anyone else, now she came to think of it, seem to wear mourning for the late Mohammed Ali.

"There's a pretender to his throne, so to speak. A cousin or uncle, a fierce ruffian, one Ahmed Kamedo. He hates the present more civilized ways of his house. So he led a band of turbulent chaps like himself right up to Mohammed Ali's territory one bright morning, called a council, tried to force them to change the succession, and then when he found he hadn't an earthly chance of getting his own reactionary way, engaged a sniper to pot his august relative as he was riding home again. Not that he did much good to himself or his political views by the action. For they say the mother of this lad is equal to them all."

"Oh," said Charlotte, "go on, George."

Delighted that for once he seemed to be holding her attention, he continued to endow her with information.

"Well, the chap over there is off tomorrow—to his private kingdom. And time he went, too, I understand. So I suppose later on I shall have to chase him about Morocco to get an interview—my chief is sure to insist on one."

Then he leant across the table and lowered his voice mysteriously.

"I say, Charlotte, does he remind you of anyone?"

"Me," she returned in a startled voice. George's unexpected perspicacity was disturbing.

"Yes—personally I think he's the image of that foreign fellow the Adams' took in last summer. Kirsty's patient, as we used to call him. It's true I only set eyes on him once, but I wonder it didn't strike you—the likeness."

"I hardly looked at him," said Charlotte.

"Because you saw quite a lot of him the afternoon of Mrs. Adams' tennis party."

"Oh, nonsense!" said she. "How should I remember when he was all bound up then, and I only saw him"—she had the grace to hesitate before she uttered the lie—"once. What a dreary affair that was at the Rectory, too."

George snapped up the bait. "I'm sure I found it so—couldn't get near you the whole afternoon——"

Zeid, who had perceived Charlotte and her cavalier almost from the first moment of his arrival in that antechamber to Gehenna, as he now found it, continued to eye moodily what looked to him too much like an increasingly warm flirtation. Moment by moment he was conscious of a mounting anger. Had she not told him distinctly in the summer that of all people George Painter bored her? Nobody, regarding her now, would have thought so. Therefore when at last they rose to go, and inevitably passed by his table, his look was as icy and strange as anything of which Charlotte could have been guilty. George, undecided as to whether he had really met the fellow before or

not, hurried by and did not notice the murderous look each gave the other.

On her arrival at the house in the Rue de Bellechasse, Charlotte learned that she was to travel to Tangiers within the next five days.

CHAPTER 7

A good ten years younger than her more amiable sister, the Princess Mohammed Ali yet looked easily the elder. For where the hair of Marie de Dasulas was gray and abundant, her sister's was already white and sparse; where the elder was stout but still active, the younger woman, in her shapeless, Moorish draperies, appeared mountainously fat—the result of an almost completely sedentary life —and moved with ponderous difficulty. Nevertheless in spite of these marked physical disabilities, and by virtue of a remarkable character, she still commanded the respect and allegiance of many men. From her dark eyes there yet at times leapt a fiery and domineering spirit wholly untamed.

She was sitting, one afternoon in early December, wrapped in those voluminous muslins of native workmanship she had adopted for daily wear ever since her marriage, in an immense wicker chair in the drawing room of her sister's house in Tangiers, apparently inert and somnolent. Any casual observer would have imagined she was allowing time to slip by unremarked and idly. But the casual observer would have been mistaken, for the Princess Mohammed Ali was on the warpath.

A couple of hours before she had arrived in the white city of the Straits as unobtrusively as had always been her custom, in answer to an urgent private summons from her son's fiancée. And if the contents of that incoherent letter Gabrielle Davonier had sent her were true, it meant the destruction of all her hopes. Yet, long experience having taught Laure Davonier that in the end she usually

reached her goal by one means or another, she was not agitating herself unduly. Time enough when she was quite certain she had cause. But she must analyze Gabrielle's mood first, and then bring pressure to bear on Zeid, if necessary. Her way, of course, she meant to have. Meanwhile she remained supine and motionless, an indolent mass of flesh; and, as the clock hand jerked its way around the dial, she even dozed as she waited. For these two occupations she had patiently learned to combine a score of years before. And therein perhaps lay the secret of her power. Few people gave her credit for an active mind till it was too late.

She was reflecting that Zeid had always been a source of vexation to her from the day of his birth, and that there had been moments recently when she had, in consequence of the irritation he always caused her, even contemplated the linking of her fortunes with his cousin and enemy, Ahmed Kamedo. Only that she doubted that burly ruffian would sooner or later prove an active traitor to her, too. He having very little use for women. And very certainly for as long as they worked together he would be to her as a continual thorn in the flesh. Seeing how devious were his unpleasant ways, and that duplicity should have been his middle name.

Pondering on these and other matters, she at last opened her eyes to find the person she awaited had come noiselessly into the room and was standing before her.

This was a little thing—slight and pretty, with an extremely sulky mouth and a habit of turning up her eyes in what she considered a fetching way whenever there happened to be a man about. For women Gabrielle Davonier had no use at all, though not for the same reasons as Ahmed Kamedo. Hitherto she had been clever enough to hide this fact from her cousin Marie and her cousin Laure. She also possessed an uncanny talent for picking up bits of apparently unrelated gossip and working them into a coherent and plausible tale, usually detri-

mental to the principal actors involved. Incidentally she fancied she was in love with Zeid, and intended to marry him.

Now she glanced impatiently at the Arab girl crouching beside the Princess Mohammed Ali; whose soft eyes returned her hostile look speculatively, though she was careful not to stop for an instant the mechanical fanning of her mistress with a fantastically shaped fan of bright green feathers.

Gabrielle sighed—she wished Fatima could be got rid of. But exactly how to set about sending her out of earshot without rousing her suspicions that something was in the wind she could not decide. Also she felt doubly indolent from the hint of *sirocco* in the air, and not inclined to exert herself.

Beyond the closed shutters of the three great windows not a breath of air stirred. When she turned her head she could see, through the slate, that the terraced garden was still a mass of flaming anemones and sun-flooded paths. In spite of African palm and Monterey cypress, which stood sentinel there, there was no very great patch of shadow as yet. In the distance a far-flung expanse of blue ocean shimmered hotly.

Slowly the Princess Mohammed Ali, looking rather like a gigantic mechanical doll, opened and shut her eyes and opened them again.

"You don't look well, Gabrielle," she observed at last.

Taken aback at the lack of greeting, Gabrielle murmured, "It's the heat—I'm not yet used to the climate, Cousin Laure."

"But you'll have to get used to it, my dear."

"Oh, I mean to," she cried eagerly.

Then she took a step nearer the inert figure.

"I couldn't get away before," she continued nervously, "Cousin Marie insisted on my going to lunch with her at the villa of Monsieur de Brancas. She is still there—but

I made my excuses. Frankly I could not see the necessity —it is Charlotte Manisty he pursues."

The Princess Mohammed Ali held out a fat, much bejewelled hand. "Come sit by me," she said, "and who is Charlotte Manisty?"

Gabrielle made a grimace.

"She is an English girl—Cousin Marie's latest pet. She can do no wrong yet."

"And she is here, in Tangiers? I cannot understand why Marie loves to surround herself with strangers always."

"Yes—she lives here with us. I can't say I care for her. But then I do not see very much of her, I must admit."

"Why should you?" The Princess's voice sounded amused. "But you did not bring me here to talk about a little English girl," she added.

Gabrielle sank into the indicated chair by her side. "Nobody knows I wrote to you," she said warningly.

"And nobody will," returned Zeid's mother, firmly. "If anyone wants to know the reason of my coming here at this precise moment, it is to arrange the date of your wedding merely. That is the rumor I have already set about. So be at rest. No one will ever connect you with my journey from Marrakesch."

Gabrielle glanced doubtfully at her future mother-in-law and again wished she dared ask her to send away Fatima. She was pretty sure that dusky maiden understood the French language much better than anyone there knew.

"Zeid would kill me if he guessed what it is I believe I have found out."

She managed to shudder very tellingly to lend point to her words.

"Oh, nonsense," returned the Princess, openly skeptical. "Zeid is not really a Moor, you know—at least it is very far back. He's perfectly civilized."

"But he's behaving like a mad man now."

"My dear Gabrielle——"

The Princess patted her hand soothingly.

"Come, come, do not shed tears," she went on, "this is no moment for weakness. Relate to me what has happened—and do not waste too much time about it if you do not wish this conference of ours to be interrupted."

"He told Cousin Marie last night again—with so much fire, too—that he could not marry where he did not love."

This was the news that had brought his mother hurrying north.

"And your Cousin Marie repeated that to you? That does not sound like her, Gabrielle."

"No, no, it came to me in a roundabout way. She doesn't know I——"

"I wonder," interrupted the Princess thoughtfully, "if either you or Zeid understand what love is."

Gabrielle raised her head and looked at her for a long moment.

"I know I want Zeid," she said, and there was no uncertain ring in her voice.

"Then you must take some risks."

"I'm quite willing."

"But what's making him so intractable now?"

Quite mechanically Gabrielle Davonier turned up her eyes to heaven.

"Zeid has seen that girl again," she said in a sharp tone.

This was far from what his mother had expected to hear, and in her astonishment, if she had been capable of whistling, she now would have commenced to whistle long and loud. For this was indeed a bolt from Heaven.

"But, the English girl he had a fancy for last summer? Oh, impossible!" she cried.

"No, no, that was what he was confessing to Cousin Marie last night—I heard him," cried Gabrielle, a shade unwisely, for the Princess instantly jumped upon her.

"You were listening outside the door? How could you have been so stupid? Could you not have set someone else to spy for you?"

Gabrielle looked ready to cry.

"But he does not imagine he can go back to England and woo this girl?"

"He will not need to, she is here," said Gabrielle.

"In Tangiers?" The Princess Mohammed Ali received the blow without showing any emotion.

"Yes."

"Who is she?"

Again Gabrielle hesitated, feeling that Fatima and her fanning more than cramped her style. Then she decided to risk saying more than she actually knew to be the truth.

"I believe it to be that Charlotte Manisty," she said slowly. "Of course Cousin Marie hasn't the slightest inkling of such a thing."

The Princess Mohammed Ali frowned.

"What proof have you?" she demanded practically. It was characteristic of her to accept the information as quite possibly true, ridiculous as it seemed to her, for she had had her spies about the household, too, and had already received their reports. The name of Charlotte Manisty did not occur in them.

Gabrielle sighed again, and very gustily.

"I have no proof," she confessed. "I have only an instinct."

"Does he see much of her?"

"No, and they are certainly never alone."

"Well?"

"And she, I think, dislikes him."

"Well?"

"But—Cousin Marie would never hear a word against her."

"Why should she? There are many ways of getting rid of people who annoy one."

"But Zeid looks at her so angrily, so despairingly, sometimes. I've watched him when he imagined nobody to be looking."

"He is here often then?"

"And he takes care to lunch here when he knows she will be present—at other times he does not stay. He is too busy—he has to see the Governor, or he must ride a Fantasia with other boys as wild as he."

"Everything you say interests me," remarked the Princess Mohammed Ali thoughtfully. "But you must not show him you're jealous," she added shrewdly.

"I try not to. But Cousin Laure, it is very bitter to be marrying a man whose thoughts are continually with a stranger."

"I had that burden to bear, too," said Zeid's mother. "But we managed to get along very well. You must be tactful, Gabrielle, and not expect too much. Give him time—enmesh him with a silken cord."

Gabrielle gave a short laugh.

"That would be so much easier if she were not actually on the scene."

"But you have no proof——"

There was a tone in the older woman's voice which told the younger that the burden of proof was still on her.

"You had better run away now," continued the Princess Mohammed Ali. "Leave the affair to me. I am old and have seen many marriages in my time. Wear your prettiest dresses, hold your tongue, and watch this Charlotte Manisty. We must find out if she really is a stone in our path or not before we kick her out of it. I like to be fair—but if she is——"

Obediently Gabrielle rose to her feet, her spirits rising too. Now she felt that the affair was in competent hands, but—"Why don't you get Cousin Marie to make Monsieur de Brancas propose to Miss Charlotte?" she whispered. "If he really cares for her, and if Zeid thinks he stands between, that would be the greatest barrier of all. You know that Zeid could never bear to be a discarded lover. He has too much pride."

2.

But when Gabrielle had flitted away, having sown her seed, the Princess Mohammed Ali continued to sit pensively in her chair for a very long time. Till again the heat and silence of the afternoon had its effect on her, and she fell asleep.

For the second time she was awakened by the soft touch of Fatima's hand on her arm. But this time the girl murmured insistently, "It is the son of her Highness who stands before her now."

Slowly, as he had seen her do it a thousand times before, and always with the same sense of amusement, she opened her eyes and remained staring up at him unwinkingly for some time.

"Now you can't hypnotize me, Mother," he said.

Then, seeing that she was not going to greet him in any way, he bent and kissed her on the forehead. After this salutation he straightened up and continued to stand easily before her, an arrogant, handsome figure, dressed entirely after the native way. A fashion which suited him.

"Well, Zeid," said his mother, slowly, "so you are still wasting time in Tangiers."

"If you call it wasting," said he.

"And so am I—now," she continued with a sudden chuckle. "Why do you make me do it?"

Zeid showed an extremely fine set of teeth in a broad smile.

"Hard to believe, that, when you never wasted anything in the whole of your life. Not even a life unnecessarily, Mother. And as you sit there you look to me the picture of a very determined and——"

"Stout woman," she finished for him. "But you'll find my fat does not extend to my brain, Zeid."

"That's reassuring," he replied with a laugh.

The Princess Mohammed Ali contemplated him for a short time.

"What I wish to know is why you and Gabrielle do not seem to get on as you used. I understand from your Aunt Marie that you have suffered, shall we say, a change of heart. Now this must not be, my son."

Shrugging his shoulders, Zeid turned, and walking over to one of the windows remained with his back to her, staring out into the garden.

"Now that I would not have believed of Aunt Marie," he said slowly.

His mother allowed the remark to go unanswered. If she could sow a seed of discord between the sister she so detested and her darling Zeid, so much the better. It would even up the account a little, at any rate.

"But you will marry Gabrielle," she said languidly, and as though the matter were of no importance.

Zeid made a gesture which might equally have been one of despair or acquiescence.

"All in good time," he said. "But I swear I won't be scolded and nagged by any woman. And floods of tears will not make me more amenable. Gabrielle allows her temper to get the better of her too often. To that extent I am a whole-hearted follower of the Prophet. No marriage is secure perched on a volcano of jealousy."

Reassured a little by this speech, the Princess Mohammed Ali now inquired if he was alluding to the disposition of his fiancée in these terms.

"For I cannot believe it of Gabrielle," she ended. "She who has always been the quietest and most tactful of children. Why, it sounds absurd."

"Jealousy effects strange transformations," he threw over his shoulder.

"Then marry her, quickly," continued his mother bluntly, "for here you are twenty-four, Zeid, and you have not yet begotten your son. Now with Ahmed Kamedo watching your every movement, this is unwise."

"He is on the rampage again," observed Zeid.

His mother stirred in her deep wicker chair.

"Since when? And there is no one now in the hills to keep him in check. You should not have made it necessary for me to come in here chasing after you," she told him severely.

"Especially when your pet aversion is having to travel on a camel," he suggested with a twinkle in his eye. "I wonder you don't use a car."

The Princess sighed.

"Allah knows I should get back to our hills beyond Marrakesch as soon as possible."

"Why not take Gabrielle with you?"

His mother looked extremely surprised at the suggestion.

"Certainly not," she returned with an annoyed air. "You forget your first wedding ceremony is to take place here. And that is what I have come to arrange. Besides, were I stupid enough to take her back with me, it would create a very bad impression. Don't be ridiculous, Zeid."

"Oh, well," said he, "I thought absence might make both our hearts grow fonder, or something. I'm sure she hates the sight of me at present."

But his mother refused to rise to the bait. Instead she began to talk about Ahmed again. "When did you hear the rumor about him?" she demanded.

"Aunt Marie's courier—you know him, Le Normand—was in the Soko outside the gates the other evening. It was the day before the usual Thursday market. And he overheard an odd conversation between two men. They didn't realize that he was not of their race, dressed as he then was. He speaks their language, too, as well as they do. So he brought the chatterers to me——"

"Ah!"

"Incidentally Ahmed will lack two followers for the future."

"Who were they?"

"Allah knows," said he.

"Where are they?"

"Oh, in prison, still, I fancy. You know it is not easy to escape from the Sultan's prisons."

"No."

"Naturally Le Normand had to endure much lively cursing—he being the principal witness against them. That Allah would burn his grandmother was perhaps the simplest request made of heaven by the sturdy fellows."

"You are sure they were men of Ahmed Kamedo's?"

"Certain."

"He has been a source of trouble from a boy. He should have been strangled at birth," said the Princess Mohammed Ali.

"He will have to be got rid of in the end, I suppose," returned Zeid reflectively. Then he laughed. "Unless he gets me first. But I'll give him a devil of a good run before that."

"Long before this Ahmed should have knocked for admittance at the gates of Paradise, to my way of thinking," replied his mother. "I told your father that years ago. But he had scruples—as I had only the one son. And he would never take another, younger, woman to wife."

Impatiently Zeid tapped his heavy whip against his high riding boot.

"He is also trying to stir up strife between our people and the French authorities," he said.

"It is as I say—he needs continual watching," agreed the Princess. "Therefore you cannot play the fool any longer. You must bring your wife to the hill country and start a man's life. This boyish running up and down the world with a car is all very well for people gifted with few brains, but for you——"

"I begin to believe I have no brains at all," said he gloomily.

The Princess Mohammed Ali allowed a smile to flit across her heavy features for an instant. "One would almost think so," said she. "For instance, why must you quarrel

so violently with Gabrielle just at this moment? Has she any real reason to be jealous?"

Zeid shook his head and laughed. There was a marked bitterness in the sound. "I wish she had," he muttered.

"What did you say?"

"I said girls were the devil," he called over his shoulder, irritably.

"It didn't sound to me like that."

"Well, that was what I meant."

His mother, having heard perfectly his first dubious remark, decided to try him yet further. "Where is Gabrielle now?" she asked.

"Out at some afternoon affair with Aunt Marie, I suppose. I haven't seen her for two days—since our last upheaval."

"What was it about?"

"Something absurd—I've forgotten."

The Princess Mohammed Ali shook her head. She knew perfectly well that Zeid was lying, and after her recent conversation with Gabrielle she could make a very shrewd guess as to what the subject of their latest quarrel had been. She decided, therefore, that for once she must come into the open. And with an imperious gesture she now dismissed the immobile Fatima. She had that to say to her son she did not wish overheard. When the door at the end of the long room had shut behind her slave and her salutation, the Princess called to Zeid softly.

"Come here and sit by me—I have something important to say to you."

Something in her tone intrigued him, and he turned and came back to her—though he had been meaning to get away from her as soon as possible—stepping as lightly as a cat across the marble floor.

"Sit there," commanded his mother, pointing to that same chair on which Gabrielle had sat a bare half hour earlier.

"You waste your time, Zeid," she began after a moment.

"Why do you allow yourself to spend long hours dreaming about this girl——"

The unexpectedness of the thrust took him openly aback.

"What girl?" he demanded sulkily, but he looked very self-conscious, and at the same time he wondered who on earth could have set his mother on that trail. He had imagined not one soul knew anything about her. Then he pulled himself together. Probably his mother was playing that old trick which worked nine times out of ten of assuming more knowledge than she actually possessed. And by this means extracting all those facts from her victim that were not yet in her possession.

"How could I know her name?" returned the Princess blandly. "You managed to keep your English idyl very secret. But I began to suspect your heart was engaged when you went to all that trouble," she paused deliberately a moment before she added, "to get that Mademoiselle McLeod to Morocco."

Zeid fairly gasped.

"Kirsty?" he said. "Oh, don't be silly, Mother. She is a dear, and I hope she is settling down happily within my old palace walls. But you needn't bother to get jealous of her. For I never fell for her."

"Fell for her? What acrobatic exercise is that?"

Zeid laughed.

"Fell in love with her, then. Mother, you're barking up the wrong tree."

The Princess Mohammed Ali was quick to seize the advantage.

"Still there is a tree—and a girl somewhere. But, my son, it is as I said before, a pure waste of time."

"A waste of time," he repeated somberly, "yes, you're right there."

"In the first place," continued his mother, "she probably would not have you. After all, what are you but a desert sheik? What would she do there, living the kind of life we have to put up with? The question of religion would

again probably be almost insuperable. Then remember you are not wholly French—many drops of Moorish blood flow in your veins——"

"I'm proud of that," he interrupted her quickly.

"*Si fait*," returned his mother. "And so are we all, for that matter. But can you not realize that it is unthinkable that you should value the affection and approval of your family so little as to upset everything at the very last moment because you happen to have seen in a foreign country a prettier face, perhaps, than usual? This marriage, after all, was arranged when you were a child, one might say. And for very definite reasons."

"I know——"

"But I cannot believe," went on his mother, "that you propose to insult us all by repudiating your engagements at this late hour. Consider what an upheaval it will cause all around. Your father always thought of his people and the duties of his position before anything else."

"But suppose I cannot make Gabrielle happy, Mother. She asks so much of me."

The Princess Mohammed Ali patted him on the arm.

"Once married she will be content—I can promise you that. Besides, what any woman says or thinks in the hills of the south is of no importance. But it is what you do that will matter."

Zeid rose to his feet.

"Very well," he said, standing once more before her, "I'm quite willing to get it over."

"When?"

"Oh, in the next three weeks. The sooner the better, I suppose. I am sick of crying for the moon."

"That is good hearing," said the Princess. Then for a few seconds she pondered. "Can we not announce the wedding as a settled thing at our dinner party to-night? Marie has invited at least a dozen important guests. Such an announcement would please the French authorities greatly."

Zeid nodded.

"Make it as public as you please. Only make sure that Gabrielle will be civil to me."

"You might speak to her yourself about it, I should think."

"Must I? Very well. Marriage is a detestable necessity, Mother, but I suppose I'd better put a good face on it."

"And you will be kind to Gabrielle, Zeid," remarked the Princess, quite as an afterthought.

Zeid looked at her solemnly.

"No—I shall beat her at least twice every day, morning and evening," he returned, and strode out of the room whistling the Marseillaise.

CHAPTER 8

For more than two months now, since she had crossed the Gibraltar Strait, and on the deck of their incoming ship obtained her first sight of Tangier—so like a fairy city of snow on the Moorish hillside—Charlotte had found herself in the midst of a thousand new and strange African sights and sounds. And had felt as though she were living in an absolutely unreal world.

At first the masses of white houses, the green tiled minarets whence the faithful were called so insistently to prayer, the grim but out of date batteries looking out to sea, the beach full of pilgrims waiting for ships to transport them to Mecca, the narrow streets, the wonderful gardens hidden behind inhospitably high walls, the surging crowds of draped men, and women closely veiled, the dreadful beggars, the amazing conjurors—in short, that endless stream of Jew and Gentile, Moor and Arab, going up and down the city, confused, disturbed, attracted and repelled her.

But after she had ceased to take a mere tourist's interest in the many strange customs and sights about her, and her eye had become accustomed to the odd, bizarre architecture of the place, if one could call it that, and she had equally accustomed herself to that busy social life led by the foreign residents of Tangier, in which Madame de Dasulas played so important a part, and which incidentally kept her and her household employed from morning till night, Charlotte still found her mind unsettled and her heart aching over a man who never could mean anything in her life.

Luckily she was given very little time in which to brood over the hardship of her lot, for she found her days full of hard but on the whole pleasant work, and her nights of

equally engrossing occupation. For now that Gabrielle Davonier was with them, Madame de Dasulas seemed determined to give Zeid's future wife neither time to think nor opportunity to change her mind. She was made the center of every delightful festivity, and thoroughly spoiled from waking to sleeping. Lunches, dances, dinners followed each other week after week—the practical responsibility for which mainly fell on Charlotte. Sometimes, except that she had for her own two excellent and well-furnished rooms wherein to work and sleep, she felt, for all she saw of the world of leisure and enjoyment about her, she might as well have been at Methpeden House. True, Madame de Dasulas took care that she should accompany her to all those houses where there were younger people, and she knew Charlotte would be sure of a welcome. But, a busy hostess herself and with a thousand cares on her mind, there were many days when Charlotte, as a human being, faded into a background of letters, typing, and a variety of household duties.

On one occasion she was speaking of this to Monsieur de Brancas.

"Let the child do her work," he said, smiling a little. "And then my wooing will be the simpler if most of her amusement appears to come through me. I will give a party for her myself in the next few weeks."

But tonight, as she sat typing endless lists of groceries to be sent from Paris, Charlotte was feeling that life amongst the Moors was dull as ditch water.

Downstairs she knew there was just about concluding one of those family dinners Gabrielle had confided to her she so detested.

Her fingers still mechanically tapping the key-board of her machine, Charlotte began to wonder if she really liked that volatile little person.

True, she had been extremely civil to her whenever they had happened to meet. But Charlotte had caught, she fancied, a malevolent look from her large eyes on more

than one occasion of late. Especially when Zeid sauntered in unasked and invited himself to lunch. Though what could be more natural than a wish on his part to see his fiancée in less formal circumstances than those endless entertainments given for her by Madame de Dasulas? Charlotte, hiding doggedly all trace of feeling, would join indifferently in the conversation and excuse herself on some pretext as soon as the meal was ended. But a growing resentment often colored her cheek and lent a deceiving brightness to her eye. What right had he to treat her so familiarly? As though he were an old friend of hers. Charlotte continued to give him a very cold shoulder, remembering his uncivilized behavior in the summer. It was unforgivable that he had dared to make love to her for a whole morning, knowing all the time he was to marry Gabrielle. Quite suddenly Charlotte would glower at him when she reflected on this double dealing.

Strains of a pianola, grinding out syncopated dance music and floating up to her alluringly, began to have their effect on Charlotte, and made her very restless.

Finally catching up a green silk shawl, embroidered with clusters of wisteria, she left her solitary state and, creeping down a deserted back stair-case, slipped out into the moonlight and that sweet-smelling, enclosed garden which the balcony of her bedroom overlooked. It was, as usual, as far as she could see, empty of all but flowers, and cypress trees, and a tiled pavement which surrounded the artificial pool of water. Somewhere beyond the high, encompassing wall, in the lane that ran underneath it, some Arab boy played on his flute.

Charlotte, a prey to a wave of real depression and homesickness, sank on a marble seat near a high rosebush, and abandoned herself to an orgy of cold despair.

Was she forever to be condemned to look at the world through the eyes of other men? Must she never dance herself in the passing show?

She was in a mood of the blackest unhappiness and ready

to catch at any straw of comfort, when Monsieur de Brancas caught sight of her.

He had left the rest of Madame de Dasulas' guests dancing in her great drawing-room, to wander solitary about her gardens. In his heart he hoped he might come across Charlotte. He had missed her acutely at dinner. Even the excitement of the Princess Mohammed Ali's formal announcement of the date of her son's wedding had not succeeded in changing his mood of flat boredom. Half the charm of the evening had been discounted for him when he learned Charlotte was not to be of that party.

Now his heart leapt like a boy's at sight of her. How lovely she was, he thought. Exactly like a little Tanagra statuette. And here was all the background a lover could desire. Night, moonlight, long shadows, the scent of jasmine, and the flute player pouring out his soul to it all as an accompaniment.

Claude de Brancas halted before Charlotte.

"Mademoiselle," he said softly.

As she raised her head startled at hearing a man's voice —of whose approach she had not had the slightest warning —he fancied he could perceive traces of tears upon her cheeks.

"Mademoiselle," he therefore began again gently, "I esteem myself very fortunate to come across you at this moment. It is so long since we have had a chance to utter more than a passing greeting to each other. You are always so occupied in these days. Is it permitted that I sit by you and talk awhile?"

Glad of any companion at the moment to turn the current of her thoughts, Charlotte made room for him at once on the seat beside her.

"Tangiers does not seem to be Paris," she returned with a rueful smile. "Here I am rushed from morning to night. My work never seems to really end—especially since the Princess Mohammed Ali has taken to following me about at the oddest moments—and I have very little leisure.

After all you must not forget I am only the secretary of Madame de Dasulas."

The light bitterness of her tone made him regard her with shrewd, understanding eyes.

"And you find it—how shall we say—a trifle *triste* at times?" he suggested, offering her a cigarette and then lighting it for her. "Yes, at times a trifle dull," he repeated, beginning to smoke also. And, leaning against the carved marble back of the seat, he contemplated with unconcealed curiosity the dejected figure beside him.

Charlotte was something entirely new to him with her Anglo-Saxon bluntness, her sudden sentimentalities, her disdain for conventions—which he still felt held so much real sense and safety within their well defined limits for a woman—her devastating certainty that there was nothing to be learned from older rules of life, added to her colossal ignorance of men and their inevitable reactions to a position in which they were now set to play the game of life with opponents who considered themselves equal, if not superior, in all qualities of brain and heart. Muscle might yet be a little doubtful.

To Claude de Brancas, whose first estimate of Charlotte as a lovely, delicate thing to be petted and made much of had long been thrown into the discard, her views were incredibly foolish.

Though he was still inclined to set down much of the folly he had heard her utter to the fact that she was English.

Those were an amazing people. Always expecting to square the circle. And certainly their women possessed very little of that peculiarly feminine allure with which the women of his own race had ever been endowed. And for which, watching satirically the outspoken varieties of English and American women to be met with in Tangiers, he so devoutly thanked Providence.

"No wonder they do not hold their husbands and lovers," he would chuckle to himself. "Is it possible that the ladies

of these lands never face facts? Ah well, they always have that game of battledore and shuttlecock—divorce."

Now he continued, "Making a living, for one so young as you, always has its hardships. You are still very inexperienced to face the world alone, if I may say so."

The idea was an unwelcome one to Charlotte who liked to feel herself equal to most efforts, though just then it seemed to her there might be some truth in that statement.

"I don't mind that," she said hastily. "And you must not run away with the impression that I am complaining. I should hate to give you that notion. Madame de Dasulas is a peach to work for."

He nodded, "I know. A woman in a thousand. But she will not be so occupied after the wedding. At least the date is now fixed."

Charlotte, too proud to ask since when the day had been decided on, hurried on.

"Besides, all this," and she waved vaguely about the enchanted spot in which they were sitting, "is so perfectly heavenly. I would not be anywhere else for the world. Just listen to that flute, and smell the jasmine. It's too lovely."

"A world one would say made expressly for lovers," he returned. "Yes, it has its charm. Yet you were alone and unhappy just now, Mademoiselle. That should not be."

Charlotte could not help looking very woebegone once more. It seemed to her that during the past week the whole world had conspired to wound her feelings. Yet she was not too pleased to know that Claude de Brancas had recognized her melancholy state. She must make an effort.

"I am all right again," she said in a suddenly hostile tone. "It was a touch of homesickness, I expect. Today, also, I heard that my mother is going to remarry. That was a kind of shock. Though I know it's an excellent thing for her, too."

He saw with some amusement that she was irritated by his sympathetic attitude.

"But you should certainly be dancing in there, now," he went on thoughtfully, with a wave of his hand towards the long pile of whitewashed buildings rendered then a hundred times more dazzling by the translucent quality of the moonlight. "It is your right. Youth such as yours should be very gladly served."

Mollified by the flattery Charlotte smiled as she blew a smoke ring into the air. Then absently, as was her habit when meditating on any subject which perplexed or worried her, stabbed it through the center with the glowing end of her cigarette. It was a trick that Claude de Brancas had already learned to associate with unease of mind in her.

Then she turned to him.

"Madame de Dasulas did tell me to be sure to turn up for the dance—after the dinner. But I just didn't feel like it. The fact is, I am sick of ringing the changes on three evening frocks."

She might also have added that she was beginning to feel a little afraid of the Princess Mohammed Ali and her lazy watching of her. Recently Charlotte had found those sleepy eyes of hers focussed on her far too often. So much so that she had begun to ask herself if it could be possible that the Princess had heard of Zeid's adventures in the summer? And yet there was little or nothing in them. He had flirted with her certainly—most violently. But, what of it? It was nobody's business—now.

"Yes, I am sick of ringing the changes on three evening frocks," she repeated.

The energy of her tone made Claude de Brancas first shake his head at her and then laugh heartily.

"Just the same you should have come," he told her. "In any frock you are perfect, Mademoiselle. But I begin to believe you are a very proud little lady. And resentful, too, is it not so?"

He leant back to laugh again lazily.

"My faith, I am almost as good as a fortune teller," he ended. "I ask enough leading questions."

Charlotte laughed too.

"First—I have never been with anyone," she returned slowly.

"But you are only at the start of things," he pointed out. "You have a lifetime before you in which to attain your ambitions. And, if you will forgive my remarking it so baldly, you are so beautiful, my child, that there must inevitably arrive a moment when you will find yourself the center of much homage. Men are not blind, you know. Surely you have found that out already."

Still drooping a little Charlotte continued to smoke in silence for some seconds. Then she confessed candidly, "The moment you describe so eloquently cannot come too soon for me."

Monsieur de Brancas did not attempt to conceal the amusement she caused him.

"A cynic already?" he asked. "But let me tell you that moment of triumph rests a little with you, Mademoiselle. To be a queen—one cannot be weak."

"Why does it rest with me?" demanded Charlotte in surprise.

This question he did not bother to answer at once. As Charlotte had done just before he continued to smoke, gazing the while reflectively at the tips of his patent leather shoes, for some time before he said gravely, "But surely you are wise enough, or possess sufficient worldliness in that little head of yours, to realize that in a good marriage lies your salvation, Mademoiselle?"

"A good marriage?"

"Yes."

Charlotte raised her eyes to his and shrugged her shoulders.

"I won't pretend not to understand you," she returned. "But a girl without a penny, and a paid secretary in a house like this—what a hope!"

"All the same," he continued earnestly, at the same time watching her narrowly, "for you a marriage of the right kind is far from impossible. It would, moreover, open every door. After all the marriage of inclination is often far from ideal. But such an alliance as I mean—*de convenance,* probably—might turn out very well. That is, if you possess a clever head and are willing to learn the rules that govern the greater world. It would not do to be provincial, of course. But I am sure you are of the type that values material things—beautiful clothes, furs, jewelry, a car of the most expensive kind, foreign travel."

"Don't," cried Charlotte, "you make me positively ill when you talk like that."

"In short, all the *agréments* of life," he went on, taking no notice of her interruption. "And why not? It is your right. A woman as unusually lovely as you are—and will be—and I am not paying you merely empty compliments, I assure you, could demand—yes, that is the right word—anything—anything," he repeated with increasing eagerness. "It would be an honor to forestall your least wish."

This heady but extremely pleasant draught of nectar caused Charlotte at first to feel more than ever that she had a definite right to expect life to hand her valuable gifts. But a moment's cooler reflection set her sighing. The man by her side was a foreigner, a Latin, and given to paying extravagant compliments on the least provocation. Probably it all meant—nothing. Such prodigality in language was merely the current coin of conversation for him. No more. And of no more importance. In short this was, as she had always been taught to expect, merely the way of the Gaul. But for a moment she had lost herself—had begun to wonder—— Well, well, she must remember that it all went with the night, and the moonlight, and the scent of the flowers. And was just as gossamer and fleeting. All dreams—idle, dear, delightful dreams.

Therefore she blew a cloud of smoke into the air and began to laugh softly.

Thereby, had she only guessed it, attracting Claude de

Brancas more than ever. And for just this gay and gallant quality in her.

But he was genuinely surprised to catch a note of careless amusement in the sound.

"How I wish George Painter could only hear you," she said.

"And who is George Painter?" he demanded impatiently, unreasonably annoyed at the introduction of so irrelevant a name into the conversation.

"He's a boy I've known for years. And he thinks he's in love with me."

"Ah!"

"His bright idea is that we shall lead the simple life together."

Realizing that the subject had now suffered a decided change of direction, Claude de Brancas allowed himself to drift with the new current.

"The simple life?" he asked politely. "Of what would that consist?"

Charlotte turned to him confidentially.

"I'll tell you," she said. "He's to go out into the world —working all day for a very inadequate salary at jobs that will take him away most of the time, it seems to me. So that when I do see him he'll be as dead asleep as a dormouse in winter——"

"Not a very lively prospect."

"No—anything but. And I am to remain in a two by four flat in London and do most of my own housework."

"To keep you out of mischief."

"I shouldn't wonder," she returned with a sudden, irresistible giggle. "Then for a treat, now and then, we may eat at some cheap restaurant. Or go to a local movie house."

"That does not sound a very stimulating existence to me."

Charlotte shook her head.

"Nor to me. George, you know, is one of those uncomfortable people who are always forcing decisions on one."

"Decisions?"

"Yes. Either you choose your own way—and incidentally get damnably nagged for years after—or you give in to him and do exactly as he expects. Test cases over trifles, I always call them. And he's always so terrified of what people may be saying of him, too."

"Oh, I see."

Monsieur de Brancas was rapidly acquiring a pretty accurate notion of the kind of uninspired, bourgeois life this lovely child most feared and detested and yet expected in the end to have to endure.

He made an impatient movement.

"But why should you waste yourself on him, then? That young man could never appreciate you."

"Appreciate!" Charlotte laughed the idea to scorn. "It is I who would have to hold the candle to him always. Though he does think he is so modern."

Monsieur de Brancas said, "He sounds conceited and narrow-minded to me. Also, as I said just now, there can be no necessity for you to throw yourself away on so commonplace a young barbarian."

Charlotte sighed. Life got more difficult daily. Devoutly she hoped there might be as little need for her to consider George, or some other young man like him, as a husband, as Monsieur de Brancas appeared to think. Yet look where she would she could as yet perceive no smallest array of more dazzling admirers on the horizon.

Monsieur de Brancas was still repeating rapidly, "No necessity for you to throw yourself away on so commonplace a barbarian. These young men have too good a conceit of themselves."

Said Charlotte sweetly—

"I'm so glad you see it that way."

"Is there any other?"

"At home they seem to imagine George Painter, or someone like him, is all I have a right to expect."

"Pooh," said Monsieur de Brancas. Then he added,

"You do not—forgive the question, perhaps I should not ask it?"

"Go on," replied Charlotte.

"You do not love him, then?"

Her "No!" was contemptuous and decided enough even to satisfy him, bent as he was on winning her ultimately for himself. Though also intending to take his own time about it.

But he was not so satisfied when she continued, "Love seems to me so stupid."

He stared at her.

"What is this sentimental passion they all make such a fuss about from morning to night, after all? It does not last, whatever it is."

"As to that I would not be so sure. Say rather, that with time, one's view of it changes. Even love is a point of view, you know."

"Well, it won't pay the rent," rejoined Charlotte practically. "Nor will it buy one charming frocks. Or give one those advantages you spoke of just now."

"You drive me into a corner," he told her, smiling, and stroking his beard with long, nervous fingers. "Money alone can do that," he added.

"There," returned Charlotte energetically, "you see. But it's easy to enjoy life on ten thousand a year. I should choose money and position every time—if I got the chance. You see I was born with expensive tastes. What my little sister Nettie calls a champagne mind with a lemonade income."

"I am sure you would never do for the wife of a poor man," he smiled, and continued to watch her thoughtfully from beneath half-closed eyelids.

To him Charlotte appeared, as she sat there wrapped in that cold, little air of sophistication which sat so strangely on her, exactly like some delicate figurine of an ice maiden just as she had earlier to Zeid.

Everything about her, too, added to that illusion of remoteness.

Her white chiffon frock, her silk-stockinged and white-shod feet resting so lightly on the mosaic pavement. Her skin of an almost alabaster fairness. Her shawl, the sole touch of pale color, had slipped off her shoulders and now lay along the back of the seat. While the moon had put the finishing touch on the fairy-like illusion by turning her hair into a glistering mass of pure silver.

His thoughts of her ran along.

Such a lovely, delicate, absurd young creature as she appeared to him. With unfortunately so little heart and so pronounced an egotism already. Yet even so with all her childish ignorance of life extraordinarily and disturbingly attractive.

He found himself speculating as to whether she could possibly possess, underneath that pose of heartlessness, a better disposition than she was aware of. He knew her already to be a hard and conscientious worker where her daily duties were concerned. And extremely surprised Methpeden's Head would have been to have realized he thought so highly of her late music teacher. Far otherwise than hardworking had Miss Trout found Charlotte. But then she was certainly more interested in her second job than she had been in her first. And moreover she had found that the more she filled her days with occupation the less time she had to remember the ache in her heart or to worry herself speculating about Zeid and his affairs.

Finally Claude de Brancas remembered that Madame de Dasulas had once said that for her part she believed Charlotte owned a more affectionate nature than the child herself knew. Love therefore, he reflected, might do much for her. She might yet expand under its influence into something less cold and indifferent. Yet he found it impossible to visualize himself as the man destined to swing her off her feet. So much his watching of her during the last three

months had already taught him. Well then—possibly so much the better if she continued self-centered and lukewarm to the lure of anything but material comfort. Not easily then would she be persuaded to throw away those advantages with which he could so lavishly endow her were he so minded. So—cold and remote—he might win her and keep her the more easily. For he was under no illusion as to just what a *succès fou* as a young married woman she would make in his world.

"Have you ever really contemplated marriage with any one?" he could not forbear asking her at last.

Charlotte moved restlessly.

"All girls do," she replied evasively, "so I suppose I have. But, at least, I have always been quite honest with myself—I can't afford to marry a poor man because I like him. My mother did that. And I saw enough of the result at home to cure my yearning for cheap romance long before I was in my teens. Yet as I have no talents——"

"You play the piano very well," he interjected.

"Well enough to know how amateur I am," she retorted. "And as I hate, yes, detest earning my own living, in the long run, I must find someone who will be willing to provide for me. There's no escaping it."

"You want to escape it?"

"No——"

Then as she hesitated he said, "Go on—there is something else?"

Charlotte threw away the butt of her cigarette.

"Oh, what's the use of going over it?" she cried impatiently. "The kind of man I would look at would never look at me."

"How do you know?"

"How does one know anything? By intuition. By the law of averages. By one's circumstances."

"You might escape those," suggested Monsieur de Brancas.

"If you could show me a way——"

Here Charlotte rose suddenly to her feet and remained looking down at him with a faintly malicious, and distinctly mocking, air.

"Oh, don't let's be foolish," she said lightly, before he could answer. "You know as well as I do the kind of man I shall walk up the aisle with some day. Some country bank manager, or head of an insurance office in some small manufacturing town. Ugh!"

Once more her frank disgust at the prospect she conjured up so dramatically made him laugh as he offered her another cigarette.

"Shall I make a bet with you?" he asked, as he lit it for her.

"What would be the use?" she demanded. "I know, and you know now, what I really want. You would lose your bet for I think that I shall never get it."

"I am not so sure."

Seeing then that she intended returning to the house he rose to his feet and began to stroll down the path beside her.

"Women," he said, a shade didactically, "always get what they want."

"You really believe that?"

"In the long run. They are inescapable creatures, you know. Though sometimes the prize does not turn out exactly as they expect it. But that's life. They so often forget they have to deal with human beings, not marionettes; the strings of which they can pull as they please."

In the shadow cast by a tall cypress Charlotte frowned.

"If I could get what I want——"

"You will," he said firmly.

But as he was quite unaware that she had been thinking of Zeid all the evening the banner of red she then flew in her cheek he took erroneously to be a tribute to himself and his veiled wooing.

But Charlotte at that time was miles away from contemplating Claude de Brancas as a possible husband. For she

considered him middle-aged, if not old, and she hated his beard.

2.

A week after this conversation with Monsieur de Brancas, which to tell the honest truth faded out of her mind within an hour of their parting, she was riding with George Painter on the lower slopes of the Anghera Hills some four or five miles inland.

All about them the landscape was flooded with the violent Moroccan sunshine certainly mitigated by the breeze which was laden with the aromatic smell of many pine trees.

Not because she had been particularly keen to spend her afternoon of holiday in George's often irritating company, but because it had presented to her a way of escape from a puzzling atmosphere of storm, which seemed suddenly to have enwrapped the Villa of the Nightingales, was Charlotte listening absently to his blithesome chat about this and that.

Subconsciously she was still wondering why lunch had proved for the last couple of days so completely penitential a function. With a suddenly majestically displeased Marie de Dasulas at the head of the table and a brooding Princess Mohammed Ali at its foot. Whose marked tendency to look steadily through Charlotte seemed to grow daily more menacing. Across from her, too, there was a surprisingly monosyllabic and sniffing Gabrielle. Who appeared as as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

Really troubled at such plain signs of tempest on all hands, for no one made the slightest effort to talk, or conceal their several moods, Charlotte had found herself even more alarmed when a second day found them all apparently still contemplating funeral baked meats instead of the excellent lunch provided by the faithful Adolphe.

And though Charlotte could not imagine that she was in any way concerned with the black looks of authority about

her yet she very thankfully remembered towards the end of the second tense session at table that no duties claimed her attention for that afternoon. Indeed she was free to do what she pleased till the next day. And she hoped that by then the squall would have blown over—whatever the cause might have been.

Therefore she accepted George's unexpected invitation and his escort with a good deal more alacrity than was her custom and got herself and him as speedily away from the zone of trouble as possible.

Now they were jogging placidly along on very indifferent but surefooted horses among the undulations of the Anghera Hills; their objective the summit of one some eight miles distant from which George averred a splendid view of distant Tangiers, the Straits, and even the yellow hills of Andalusia could be obtained.

Behind them also rode George's Arab servant Mustapha, a statuesque figure sitting his beast as though he were a part of it.

It was as usual George who was doing most of the talking.

"Wasn't I right?" he said. "You see your mother is going to marry old Kingsbury after all."

"When did you hear that?" asked Charlotte, who had been keeping the not too palatable news strictly to herself.

"I got a long screed from Mrs. Adams yesterday giving me all the local gossip."

"I wish people would mind their own business," sighed Charlotte.

"Why should there be a mystery about it?" asked George in some surprise. "Anyway it's a very good thing. Your mother will be much more comfortably off. Besides old Kingsbury understands her."

"I daresay."

Charlotte's coolness seemed to damp him and after throwing a quick look at her to see whether she was in one of her moods or not he let the subject drop.

For some time they meandered along in silence.

Charlotte's eyes were on the distant hills. Ridge after ridge rose higher and higher until, far out in the south country, they became the snow peaks of the Great Atlas. But her thoughts were not of their strangely compelling beauty.

Suddenly she turned to George.

"Old Kingsbury is going to improve the house and garden and live there," she announced, as though no long gap of silence existed between her last remark and this one.

"Yes?" said George.

"Nettie and Paul will hate that."

"I don't see why."

"To have a stranger in their home?"

George laughed.

"They'll have to get used to a stepfather," he said.

"Well, that settles me," went on Charlotte decidedly.

Again he regarded her sharply.

"Now, Charlotte, what exactly do you mean by that?" he asked. "I can't bear it when you get cryptic."

"I mean," she returned slowly, "I won't go home to live again—ever. To be ordered about by two people instead of one. It's not good enough. Everyone has a right to live their own life their own way."

"Oh, nonsense," he said. "But why take it that way?"

Charlotte frowned.

"I can't help taking it that way—for one thing I can't bear Jeremiah."

George allowed his eyes to wander up the shallow, empty, stony river bed along which the horses were now daintily picking their way.

"But you're not going to marry him," he pointed out. "He is a perfectly harmless chap. Very kindhearted and one of the best lawyers in London."

"That doesn't help me."

George cast upon her an inscrutable look.

"Well, you know the remedy," he observed.

Upon Charlotte's face appeared the familiar blank look he so detested to see.

"I'm sure I don't understand you," she said pettishly.

"Oh, yes, you do. You can get married yourself and get away from it all. You're quite old enough. And you know perfectly well I'm ready to take on the job at any time."

"Is that a real, business proposal, George?" Charlotte could not help asking.

"Certainly," he replied stiffly.

Charlotte giggled.

George tugged at his wayward horse's mouth and looked at her sharply. Charlotte so often appeared amused at things which were usually considered important enough for a grave consideration, he reflected resentfully. A pity the girl was constitutionally so light-waisted.

"What's amusing in that?" he asked in a surly voice.

Charlotte opened her eyes widely.

"Dear me," she remarked pleasantly, "you have a nerve."

"What do you mean? A nerve!"

His trick of repeating isolated words and phrases that incensed him in her conversation always aroused in her a black anger. Now she did not care how she affronted him. For the moment they had both lost sight of the fact that the subject on the carpet should have been a romantic one.

"You know you haven't a penny," she gibed.

"I have about five hundred pounds a year already," he retorted coldly, "and I make, on the side, quite another two or three. One can hardly call that nothing. And I shall get on."

Charlotte refused to be impressed by the magnificence of his income.

"I am sure I hope so," she said, still looking mirthful because she knew it would ruffle George so.

Under this satirical attack he flushed up.

There were times when he certainly felt as if he could slap with great satisfaction the exasperating girl. This

was obviously to be one of those occasions. Therefore it was in extremely unloverlike even wrathful tones that he now demanded curtly, "Well, will you take it on?"

Faced with the definite question Charlotte shook her head.

"I don't think so," she returned, "thanks all the same, George. It's very unselfish of you to wish to handicap yourself with a wife."

"Handicap! What nonsense! Two can live as cheaply as one."

"Now, you know that's nonsense," returned Charlotte briskly. "Besides, I shouldn't suit you."

"Surely that's for me to say."

"Not at all—I'm doing you a kindness by pointing it out. We shouldn't get on. Look how we bicker now. And we don't see each other so often, either."

George frowned.

"Do we bicker?" he asked. "I've never noticed. But we shouldn't if we were married."

"Why not? Should we suffer a change of outlook completely?"

"Things would be different then—we'd settle down."

Charlotte looked away over her horse's head at the distant mystically blue hills.

"I can't see any reason why they should be different—our ideas of each other and the world. Saying a few words over us won't alter our tempers——"

"Charlotte!"

"Besides hasn't it ever occurred to you that Hilda would make you a much better wife?"

"Hilda?"

His voice was full of the blankest surprise.

"Yes, she loves saving string and halfpennies. She's sure to die well off."

He stared at her in amazement. The mental processes of his companion's rapidly moving brain were always inexplicable to him. Slow and ponderous thinker as he

was. She possessed such a disconcerting trick of bounding chamois-like from point to point of thought. So often apparently entirely unrelated points of meditation, too.

"Hilda?" he repeated. "Whatever put Hilda in your brain?"

But having done as she hoped her cousin in the long run a good turn Charlotte was not inclined to dwell on the subject. She had done her best to plant the germ of this very appropriate idea in his thick head—now let nature do the rest.

"Oh, it was just one of those wandering notions that attack me sometimes," she returned evasively.

"But—Hilda!" he said again.

"Well, why not? I know she likes you. How she does it I don't know but she admires you, George. And she loves doing all the stuffy things you do, too. Like crossword puzzles in the Sunday papers. And answering books of questions about people being born, and what they did—you know the kind of thing. And playing a mild game of auction three times a week. And going to cheap restaurants——"

George found nothing to say to all this. Charlotte's likes and dislikes certainly weighed little with him because his common sense told him that half the time her fulminations were more or less pure rhetoric. But her suggestion had disturbed him considerably. The more so because he was surprised to find the thought not at all a disagreeable one. At least Hilda was a restful, sympathetic kind of girl. Not particularly pretty but full of good sense. He knew that. He supposed he might do a great deal worse than adopt Charlotte's suggestion. But what in thunder had made her want to insert the idea in his head just at this juncture when for so many years she knew perfectly well he had intended to marry her some day?

By this time they had reached a wide stretch of undulating desert sand and away to the right, about a mile from where they trotted along, there stood a cluster of swaying

palms and a patch of green grass about a well-head. Near these trees a fairly large group of desert horsemen was riding towards it in a kind of loose, open formation.

George was just about to turn to Charlotte and demand of her very peevishly why she must make such ridiculous suggestions about Hilda when he was making her a proposal of marriage, when she changed the current of his thoughts abruptly by pointing into the distance and saying, "I wonder what they are."

With extreme promptness he reined up and called back to his servant who was some yards behind them, "Who are those? Are they harmless, Mustapha?"

The Arab's hawklike look concentrated itself on the distant troop for some moments.

Then he said, "It is the young Sheik Zeid—the son of the Princess Mohammed Ali. He has been riding a Fantasia somewhere in the desert. For, look, those with him have the air of tired men."

"Oh," muttered Charlotte, "I hope they don't notice us."

"Why should they?" asked George. "I have only spoken to him a couple of times. I have seen a good deal more of that Frenchman, De Brancas. Though he never troubles to remember me. For every time I meet him I have to introduce myself to him again."

Mustapha looked across at the band, now coming rapidly up to the well, once more.

"Unless my sight is not as good as it used to be—Monsieur de Brancas rides with them too," he said.

"Oh, bother," said Charlotte.

And she continued to scrutinize the distant figures with a trace of anxiety in her air.

"Need we go by that well?" she asked at last.

George laughed.

"Don't be a goat," he said. "They won't even look at us. Why should they?"

"Why shouldn't they?" she retorted testily.

It seemed to her George was always ignoring facts that completely altered situations.

"He really is very obtuse. He simply doesn't know what he is talking about," she thought.

Then she continued aloud, "Why shouldn't they? We're not exactly ants, you know."

Her sarcastic tone made George frown again as he started his horse off. For the last few moments they had all three been standing still. Annoyed that his proposal had been left so in the air he began to emit a series of displeased grunts. Though he was far from believing Charlotte's refusal to be final. Girls never really knew their own minds. He would certainly try again and hope for better luck. In the end she would take him. But it was too provoking that her attention—always so ready to wander—should be distracted at this precise moment when he was perfectly prepared to discuss the matter of their marriage quite patiently for some time. He had, as a matter of fact, particularly wanted to get the question settled once and for all. That was why he had asked her to spend the afternoon with him. Not that he had been going to urge on her an immediate wedding. But his business in Morocco being so nearly finished, and his special articles all written and on their way to England, it would have been pleasant—rounded off his jaunt abroad, as it were—could he have returned to London an engaged man. At bottom he knew himself to be very genuinely attached to Charlotte. And ready to make her the most conscientious of husbands if she would only let him.

However, now they proceeded for some yards, after her last ill-timed discourtesy, in a chilling silence. And then it seemed that after all she had gauged the situation better than he had for quite suddenly two horsemen detached themselves from the front rank of the band and came swiftly over the shifting sand towards them.

"It is the young Zeid himself," said Mustapha.

Arrived within hailing distance both horsemen halted;

remaining in statuesque stillness waiting for George and his companion to come up to them.

Dressed in gorgeous desert robes of white silk and scarlet, with a snowy turban decorated with thick cords of scarlet wound in a design about it, Zeid sat on his animal absolutely immovable.

Even Charlotte, who thought at the moment that she detested him, had to admit that he made a magnificent figure.

"He means to speak to us," muttered George.

"So I perceive," said Charlotte.

Something in her tone made him look at her quickly.

"Of course, you know him too—now," he said.

"Yes."

"Do you see much of him?"

His tone held a curious undercurrent of jealousy in its quality.

"Oh, so so. He comes to lunch when he wants to see Gabrielle. And of course he is always at all the dances and dinners. They seem to bore him stiff."

By this time they were upon Zeid and Monsieur de Brancas who, it turned out, was the other Moor.

"May Allah protect you," was his greeting to Charlotte.

In silence Zeid saluted both Charlotte and George and returned the salutation of Mustapha.

"This is an unexpected rencontre," said Monsieur de Brancas. "You have chosen a wonderful afternoon for a ride."

George, finding Charlotte appeared for some reason unexpectedly tongue-tied, replied in suitable terms of enthusiasm about the fineness of the day and the beauty of the landscape while Zeid continued to stare gloomily at his companion.

At last he said, "Do you consider it safe to be riding out so far from Tangiers without an escort?"

George looked annoyed and Charlotte more frozen than ever.

"Certainly," she answered crisply. "I am sure Mr. Painter is quite capable of taking care of me. And he has his servant, too."

"Yet a man without arms encumbered with a woman," pointed out Zeid in a half contemptuous tone, "would avail little. This is not Europe. And here people are apt to take what they want."

Without waiting to see the effect of his words on any of them he turned directly to George.

"Where were you going?" he asked.

Rather elaborately George explained about the particular view and hill to which he had been conducting Charlotte.

Zeid nodded.

"May we not come too?" suggested Monsieur de Brancas, and though his words were addressed to George his eyes were on Charlotte.

"Why the man is in love with her," thought George, a sudden jealousy lending him unusual clarity of vision. And his brain added with a logic that disturbed him vastly, "Then what chance have I?"

But her hesitation was marked enough for Monsieur de Brancas' eager air to change to one almost of disappointment. However finally Charlotte said, "Why not? It is very kind of you."

Before they quite knew what had happened Monsieur de Brancas was on one side of her and Zeid had wheeled his horse and was on the other. George thus finding himself thrust into the background fell in beside De Brancas sulkily enough while behind them came Mustapha and a couple of Zeid's men.

Thus grouped they proceeded at a steady trot without speaking for some time.

Finally Zeid said to Charlotte in a low tone, "Now you can't escape me."

The sound of his voice had a perfectly devastating effect on her. Already full of an unrest that mounted with each moment his sudden addressing of her almost robbed her

of her self-control. Nervously she cast an alarmed look about her to see if anybody had overheard him. But George was by now talking animatedly to Monsieur de Brancas although he was still regarding her with a look of steady kindness.

"You look tired, Mademoiselle," he said; "I fear you have been working too hard. You must not overfatigue yourself before the day of my dance. I am counting so much on you coming to it."

This announcement sent another jealous pang through the heart of George. This was the first time he had heard anything of a dance. And it appeared to him that Monsieur de Brancas was giving it more or less for Charlotte. Not a very pleasant thought for him. In the first place it would put too many ideas in her head, and secondly he knew he would never be in a position to entertain her on so ostentatious a scale. But if the thought of such an attention irritated George it did not seem to please Zeid any more. For he changed the subject with the greatest abruptness.

"I have an idea that we shall have *sirocco* soon," he said. "Or perhaps a sandstorm."

As the sun was then shining with extreme vigor and there was not a hint of storm about the sky George stared at him.

"What makes you think that?" he asked curiously.

"My second sight," said Zeid.

Then he turned abruptly to Charlotte again.

"That isn't much of a horse you're riding," he said. "Do you imagine it's equal to a gallop?"

Charlotte shook her head.

"I should hardly think so."

But Zeid catching her bridle in a firm grasp called out to the other two, "I am going to see if this animal is equal to a canter. Don't bother to come—we shan't be far ahead, I'll bet. And it's a straight line to your hill and your view, Mr. Painter. All you and De Brancas have to do is to come on at your leisure."

Claude de Brancas laughed.

"Zeid, you always have so much energy. Supposing Mademoiselle Manisty does not wish to be made the subject of such an experiment."

Quite unexpectedly Zeid smiled brilliantly at Charlotte.

"But you will be amiable—for once," he challenged her.

Something wild and ungoverned within her flamed into life—like a lightning flash. Very well, she would be reckless. She had been circumspect far too long.

"Yes," she said, "for—once."

And she laughed back at him.

For some moments after the wildly careering pair had disappeared over the ridge leaving a cloud of dust behind them both George and the Frenchman gazed after them silently.

In the minds of both men the same disturbing idea had sprung to life and at the same moment.

Could it be possible that Zeid, too, had fallen a victim to her charms? There had been certainly something very possessive in the way he had taken her off with him.

CHAPTER 9

The Princess Mohammed Ali was at last on the point of leaving Tangiers and returning to her feudal castle in the Southern Mountains, two days' journey beyond Marrakesch. For as the affair of her son's marriage appeared to have been proceeding recently according to plan, and a satisfactory conclusion, and Zeid and Gabrielle were to all appearance on their old cousinly terms again, she saw no reason to remain longer in a household she disliked and a place she detested. Besides her own home had been left too long to the ruling of her steward and that new Scotch nurse Zeid had insisted on importing to look after the medical side of their establishment. Moreover in less than a couple of weeks now a civil as well as a religious ceremony would bind him irrevocably to Gabrielle Davonier and the first step in the Princess's campaign to remove him from the vicinity and influence of her sister, to which she had had to submit too long, would be taken.

But it was not of her son's marriage, or those ornate ceremonies of which both he and Gabrielle must so soon now be the central figures when they reached Asrah Jabal, that she was thinking at ten o'clock on the evening before her departure.

No, she was wondering if she should not pay Charlotte Manisty an unexpected and informal visit in her own rather remote quarters. For that bubble called self-restraint had almost collapsed again in the last hour or so as far as her future daughter-in-law was concerned.

Hysterically she had come rushing to the Princess with a tale she had but just heard from her maid Zuleika; to whom the story had been related that day it seemed by

her lover Mustapha. A servant of some tourist, at the moment in Tangiers, called Painter. And it appeared according to Zuleika that Zeid had been seen riding with Charlotte in the desert some three days previously. And the recital had profoundly disturbed Gabrielle.

But beyond breathing rather heavily the Princess Mohammed Ali, as usual relaxed in a great armchair in the darkest part of her sitting room, had listened to the narrative without showing any signs of outward discomposure.

Gabrielle came to the end of it all and sank into the nearest chair sobbing and biting at her handkerchief.

"She may yet take him from me, you see," she wailed. "With a person of that character one is never safe."

"Pooh, nonsense," said the Princess to this.

"But you see there is something between them," Gabrielle insisted. "That she should have the impudence to spend her holiday thus. And that Zeid could be so deceitful."

The Princess Mohammed Ali held up her hand.

"Calm, calm," she said. "Very little truth is ever arrived at when one loses one's common sense. There may be so many explanations. Do not let yourself become too overwrought."

"How can I help it? I thought everything was going so well. Zeid has been very charming lately. But you see his mind is still on her. How dared he go riding with her?"

"You still hold to it that she is the girl he has a fancy for. In all these weeks I have seen no evidence of it myself. And where did you hear this cock-and-bull story?"

A trifle dashed by so cool a reception of her news Gabrielle explained once more at some length the whole story.

"Ah, this Mustapha——"

"He is Zuleika's lover."

"That jade has no morals," interjected the Princess reflectively. "She will end therefore violently without doubt."

"And Mustapha is the body servant of some friend of Charlotte Manisty's."

"A man let us hope, in that case," remarked the Princess Mohammed Ali piously.

Gabrielle sighed—at such a moment a display of humor seemed to her sadly out of place.

"The Painter person—" she continued, "he is a journalist I think, and Zuleika says he is in love with Charlotte. What all the men can see in that willow wand I cannot imagine. Even De Brancas is silly about her."

The Princess Mohammed Ali stared thoughtfully at Gabrielle for a space.

"It occurs to me that you gossip a great deal with your maid," she said finally. "Perhaps you know whether this Mr. Painter will marry her—Charlotte Manisty I mean. Do you know that too?" she ended, with a laugh.

But Gabrielle shook her head, and the older woman continued pensively, "Yes, I understand that De Brancas intends to ask her to be his wife."

"Oh," cried Gabrielle.

"It is for her he gives that ball tomorrow night, so Marie tells me. No, the minx does not lack admirers. Her type never does. But also her type is as usual too inclined to cheat when it comes to the big affairs of life. That kind of character invariably wants something for nothing, and imagines that the world owes them a living. And as I do not wish her to marry De Brancas—perhaps in that weakness of her nature, should such a weakness be hers, I shall be able to get rid of her. Decidedly she is too much in the way as far as we are concerned."

"There I agree with you."

The Princess Mohammed Ali continued firmly, "Certainly she must never become the wife of De Brancas, and a citizen of France. That would upset my plans too much, I fancy. To have her forever ensconced in the very heart of our society here—and in Paris."

"But what can you do?" cried Gabrielle impatiently. "Oh, oh, I hate her, I hate her. What unkind fate sent

her here just now? Zeid and I were very contented with each other before she came to trouble us."

Again the Princess Mohammed Ali raised an indolent hand.

"Rest easy, she will not trouble you much longer, Gabrielle. I leave Tangiers tomorrow, it is true, and shall not see you again until you are Zeid's bride—according to the laws of France. But rest assured you have nothing to fear from the little Manisty girl. Let her have all the charm in creation—it will not avail her much in the end. There are many ways of removing her from our path. Yes, I shall myself clear up this situation."

Gabrielle looked extremely relieved to find the Princess so firm on this point.

"Therefore go away now, and leave me to think," continued the elder woman. "Also try to be less jealous of Zeid."

This attack made Gabrielle present a very sulky appearance.

"How can I help it?" she demanded.

Indifferently the Princess Mohammed Ali regarded her.

There were certainly times when she almost wished Gabrielle was not going to be her son's wife. For the better acquainted she became with the girl the less she liked her character. So much petulance and ill humor presaged much trouble ahead. Zeid had never been a very patient person and he would certainly grow tired very soon of a termagant for a wife. But it was too late to change her policy now. The one important thing was to get Zeid married and, as soon as was compatible with decency, insist on Gabrielle producing the son who was so necessary to bind the loyalty of their tribesmen to them. Ahmed Kamedo was beginning to draw to himself too many friends. And the fact that he had not enjoyed a Western education was making him daily more popular with a certain section of their adherents. It needed only a judicious second mar-

riage, and the punctual arrival of a son, for him to become a real menace. His first wife having proved but a barren stock had been recently sent back to her own people, and Ahmed was now on the lookout for a new spouse. The Princess Mohammed Ali smiled gently as she reflected that he was a dashing devil with a real flair for women.

"Well," she said, answering Gabrielle's question at last, "I should say you could only control your jealousy by the employment of will power."

"Oh, that—," sniffed Gabrielle scornfully. And after that allowed herself to be dismissed indifferently.

Left to herself the Princess Mohammed Ali cogitated upon the situation.

As she had told Gabrielle she did not believe there was a thing between the little English girl and her son. For some time she had watched them both pretty closely, and as far as she could tell they seemed to dislike each other rather than to be friendly. However to be on the safe side she had in the last few days suggested to her sister that it might be advisable to return Miss Manisty back to England fairly soon, on the score that she would be in the way during the ceremonies of the wedding. She had been surprised to receive a flat refusal from Marie de Dasulas even to consider the idea. Almost against her own beliefs she had then pointed out to Marie that Zeid might be casting an eye towards Charlotte—only to have her relative laugh openly at her for an imaginative and romantic fool. It was partly because this attitude had angered her that she now made up her mind to exert herself sufficiently to seek out Charlotte and discover for herself if there were any truth in Gabrielle's reiterated accusation.

As she moved slowly along endless matting covered corridors and finally up a wide staircase to the second floor of the great, rambling house she ruminated on the possibility of being able to prevail on Charlotte to leave Tangiers of her own volition. She would certainly endeavor to compass this end. For failing this she might

have to take other measures, of which the issue could not be foreseen.

As she turned down the passage she knew led to Charlotte's room to her astonishment she came face to face with her maid Fatima.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded harshly.

Fatima managed to look the picture of injured and puzzled innocence.

"I—I, Excellency? I am on my way to deliver a message with which Madame entrusted me for Miss Manisty."

"What message?"

"She wishes Miss Manisty to visit the Soko tomorrow morning with Monsieur Le Normand to make some purchases for her."

"I will tell her—go you about your business now."

Obediently saluting her mistress, although she looked sulky and injured, the girl was about to turn away when the Princess called out to her sharply, "You will not journey tomorrow with me to Asrah Jabal—"

Rapidly Fatima spun around, yet remaining on the tips of her toes seemed poised for instant flight.

The Princess continued to stare at her steadily.

"You will remain here."

"Here?"

"Yes, I have certain tasks for you to perform—which require a still tongue. When those are done there will be a swift camel waiting for you by the gate in the upper town. See to it that you carry out your orders, and, above all, do not make the mistake of chattering. Or you may find yourself wandering some dark night about the outskirts of Paradise—into which you assuredly will not enter —sooner than destiny had intended."

Into Fatima's dark eyes there crept a singular expression of defiance. But all she said, in a humble tone, was, "This slave is deaf, dumb and blind according as my Mistress desires."

Then she touched rapidly, ear, mouth and eye with the tips of her right hand fingers, and would have gone on to prostrate herself ceremonially had not the Princess Mohammed Ali stopped her with marked impatience. These genuflections were all very well but they took time.

"Go now," she commanded. "But—remember always you are my slave. And your duty is to me alone."

With a swift and this time decidedly perfunctory obeisance the Arab girl turned and left her while the Princess continued slowly on her way. But before she had proceeded more than a few feet up the corridor in the direction of Charlotte's closed door there sounded almost simultaneously from the direction in which Fatima had gone a loud cry and a crash.

Turning quickly the Princess Mohammed Ali perceived that the careless creature had now fallen evidently headlong down the whole flight of stairs.

There, at the foot of them, on the next landing she lay—a huddled heap of muslins, thin brown legs and arms, gaudy necklaces and bangles.

When her mistress reached the head of the stairs and peered down at her she called out sternly, "What carelessness is this, Fatima?"

A loud groan from the recumbent form was the only answer she received.

Therefore cursing softly under her breath in fluent nervous Arabic the Princess descended heavily to the side of her prostrate handmaiden in order to discover just what damage her unconventional transit from the upper reaches of the mansion had done to her. But although she poked at the girl with her stick, speaking at the same time imperatively and harshly to her in her own tongue, it was some moments before Fatima, groaning again, opened languid eyes on the world.

Then she moaned, "Allah be merciful, for I believe every bone in my body to be broken."

Her mistress returned to this suggestion an uncompro-

mising, "Ridiculous! Don't exaggerate, you little fool. An insignificant fall like that—and you originally a dancer. Don't be childish. Tell me another more likely tale."

Thus roughly admonished Fatima, with much groaning and sighing and sudden clutchings of herself, rose slowly at last to a sitting position. Whence she remained looking up at the Princess with mournful, accusing eyes while she continued to feel herself most carefully all over to discover in what region she might actually have sustained some injury.

Meanwhile the Princess Mohammed Ali, not at all impressed by Fatima's suffering air, regarded her handmaiden dubiously. Uncertain whether to look upon the noisy affair as the unpremeditated accident it appeared on the face of it to be, or to find in it some hidden, sinister meaning. For while her reason told her Fatima could have had no possible motive for warning anyone of her presence there, yet a curious sixth sense she had always possessed, added to her long and intimate knowledge of the talent for intrigue with which all native women were endowed, rendered her uncertain and suspicious.

"Allah, what misfortune that I should have caught my foot on the very top step of all," wailed Fatima loudly, rubbing her shoulder.

"Is it necessary that the whole city of Tangiers should be made aware of your folly?" demanded the Princess unsympathetically.

"But there is nobody to hear me," returned Fatima decidedly, now massaging her shins busily. "On this passage there are but the rooms of the little English girl and some empty guest chambers. Also two rooms that are used as sleeping chambers by others who serve the sister of my Mistress. But these Frankish servants are not yet come up from their quarters below. For to-night they listen to the music box which also tells the news of the world in a man's voice."

So it could only have been a careless accident after all on Fatima's part, the Princess mused. And felt oddly relieved. For in her heart she was mildly attached to her dusky, wayward maiden.

"There, get along," she ordered her, not unkindly. "You haven't hurt yourself, child. Give Allah the praise. What you lack is self-control. Also the gift of looking before you leap."

"Very certainly that, Mistress," assented Fatima, with a grin which displayed a very fine set of teeth.

"And I will deliver your message, as I said before. I wish my sister would send her own servants on errands to those of her household, but as I have business with the English girl—I suppose she is in her room?"

But to this question Fatima shook her head and again displayed all her molars in a broad smile.

"I cannot tell," she replied, with one of the expressive native gestures, "for you see, the door had not opened for me."

Then with a final groan she rose to her feet and hobbled away almost bent double like some old woman.

"Always the little artist," called the Princess Mohammed Ali ironically after her.

But when she stood on the threshold of Charlotte's fast shut door, her hand raised to knock on its panels, it suddenly flashed across her that Fatima had, when she first encountered her, been very obviously moving down the passage away from it.

Now Charlotte's rooms were the last ones on that corridor.

What if the girl had been lying to her after all?

And Fatima had had some message for Charlotte which had been already delivered?

Her mind again black with suspicion the Princess Mohammed Ali abruptly thrust open the door and stalked into Charlotte's sitting room.

2.

Since that afternoon upon which George and she had so unexpectedly met an unruly Zeid and, from George's point of view, a far too interested De Brancas, Charlotte had suffered the greatest disturbance of soul. Her disquiet had been perhaps the more painful because, when at last the view she had been taken out to see had been duly admired, she had found herself involved, on the way home, in a most shattering and flaming row with an openly furious and jealous George. Who had amongst other things very definitely accused her of having encouraged both Zeid and De Brancas to fall in love with her.

"As if I could help it—even if it were true—which it isn't——" she had flung at him with tears of rage filling her eyes.

But not only because the emotional George had harried her with a lengthy and sternly delivered sermon all the way back to the Villa of the Nightingales on the unseemliness of her "flirtatious ways," as he expressed it, and her love of admiration, which he assured her would involve her in the most unpleasant consequences before long—"What a croaker you are, George," she had said to this—but also because she had had to endure an almost equally afflicting session with an imperious Zeid, was Charlotte beginning to find the burden of life a good deal too much for her. She was fairly distraught by the time she reached the safe harbor of her own rooms again. For Zeid, skilfully carrying the war into the enemy's camp, had had the gall to declare that it was her very aloofness which had encouraged him. On that occasion, too, although he had said little that could be actually construed into an avowal of passion, yet he had allowed the suffering Charlotte most recklessly to perceive how thin the chains had worn that bound him to duty and Gabrielle.

"So it's all my fault," she had said sarcastically, after

listening in silence to his tirade for some time. "I suppose you haven't the slightest idea how mean you are to say such things."

But all he returned vehemently to this was, "Why were you so hateful to me in Paris? Flirting with that journalist fellow before my very eyes. Oh yes, I watched you, Miss Manisty, carrying on with him for a long time in the Café de la Rotonde. That put me off completely for weeks, I can tell you. For I said to myself—if she really prefers that fellow! But then it seemed to me impossible. Also I was not so deep in then, and might have got free of my present entanglements——"

"How can you talk of Gabrielle in that way?"

"Besides, what harm had I done you that you should treat me so savagely?"

"You deceived me."

Zeid's laugh was overwhelmingly and bitterly taunting.

"Deceived you! What an idiotic expression! But really from your attitude one might think I had asked you to spend a week-end with me somewhere."

Charlotte, as well as her strangely cantering steed would allow at the moment, turned and looked him in the eye.

"Well," she said, "weren't you leading up to that?"

"You are not the kind of girl one asks for so short a period," he retorted unamiably. "But, Allah lend me patience, what do you girls of to-day expect when you lead us all on as you do—and then run away? Don't pretend you don't understand the game you play."

"I don't pretend anything," returned Charlotte. "I only want to be left alone."

After this he rode by her side in silence for some time looking vaguely over the landscape before he remarked in an utterly abstracted tone, "Like hell you do, Rapunzel."

And while Charlotte was still under the spell of that fascination which the use of that name with which he had endowed her always exercised over her, he suddenly began

to argue in the most didactic manner that the studied deception of which she appeared to be accusing him was a figment of her own brain. Why should he have told her his private affairs away back in the summer? When she was a total stranger to him—which she must remember she certainly was then.

"And why did you call yourself by that absurd name, Nicolas Vaurien?" demanded Charlotte, who had always had a lively curiosity upon this point.

"It was a name my Aunt Marie gave me as a little boy. A kind of pet name. So when I had my accident it was the first name that came into my head. Also it is true. For I do not seem to amount to much—at any rate in your eyes. Besides if I had told those good, insular people, in that Surrey village, that a few drops of Moorish blood flowed in my veins—of which I am uncommonly proud, mind you—there would have been a nice *patatras* at once."

From her knowledge of her relatives and acquaintance Charlotte was obliged to admit there was some truth in this statement.

"That I kissed you," he went on, laughing at her, "I do not regret. No, I do not. After all, why make such a fuss about a kiss? I'll bet it was not the first time. Anyway, it was worth it—even if it made me an outcast as far as you are concerned. *Hé da*, Rapunzel have pity on a poor young man. We are both making a great fuss about nothing, I think—also you are the most lovely thing I have ever met."

"Foreign soft soap," she returned scornfully to this, "and also—bosh."

"Not at all," he rejoined, looking very amused. "I will say this for you, you are a good fighter. And it makes it all the more exciting. Do you know I dream of your hair at night?" he ended on a suddenly changed note.

Charlotte utterly refused to meet his lover like glance.

"You might be dreaming of something much better,"

she snapped at him. "I cannot imagine why you foreigners are always so silly."

"We have imagination, and are not afraid of passion as you all are," he retorted. This outspoken criticism of hers making him waver between anger and laughter again. Finally he said looking at her almost tenderly, "What a dear, stupid, little thing you are. With about as much knowledge of men as an infant in arms. Some day some man will certainly teach you a lesson. I wish to God it could be me."

It was this epochal conversation which had remained sticking obstinately in her brain for days now. Providing a queer kind of ardent undercurrent to all of her doings since that afternoon. Underneath it all Charlotte was beginning to wonder if she could carry on much longer. She was almost on the point of retiring from the battle ground. Devoutly she hoped Zeid would not have the opportunity to talk to her alone again. For if he said much more to her in that strain she knew she would not be able to answer for the consequences. After all she was young, as he had pointed out, and by this time she knew herself to be deep in love with him.

And now as she sat on her balcony again in the evening in the moonlight, with her day's work done, with his letter in her lap, that Fatima had just brought her, she was beginning to believe for her own peace of mind, if not her safety, she had best return as soon as possible to England.

For though the missive was certainly short yet like Zeid himself it was forcible and distinctly agitating.

Charlotte, a faint smile hovering about the corners of her mouth, picked it up and read it over again—"You little thing—you Rapunzel, you—I have to go into the desert for some days—but I shall come back—and when I do—I shall have to say to you that to which you will be forced to listen."

His signature dashed itself boldly across the foot of the page—Zeid.

Charlotte looked out over the moonlit garden and the dark masses of cypress trees unseeingly.

"Probably I would be better getting my ticket home at once," she mused. "But after having had a taste of this—how can I go back to that poky little house in Surrey, and Mother's endless lectures? I just feel I can't do it. If only Zeid," for she was beginning to call him that to herself now, "if only Zeid—well, it was rotten luck he was already tied up to that jammering Gabrielle. If only Zeid and I——"

And then steeped in bitter-sweet dreams of what might have been had fate been kinder she lost count of time and sense of place till a sudden crash and a loud outcry somewhere within the upper part of the house recalled her to the uninspired present.

Curiously alarmed by the enigmatic sounds and their equally startlingly sudden cessation, Charlotte jumped to her feet and sped into her sitting room.

All was quiet now—not a sound seemed to be stirring anywhere.

Then some half awakened instinct of caution made her slip to the door—her letter clutched tightly in her hand—open it a crack and peer out into the dimmer light of the long corridor outside.

After a moment she gathered it was Fatima who had fallen down the stairs.

Charlotte heard her say to some one in loud, wailing tones, "Allah, what misfortune that I should have caught my foot on the very top step of all."

It was with a growing feeling of distrust and alarm that she now, to her utter mystification, heard the Princess Mohammed Ali's deep voice reply.

What on earth, thought Charlotte, could she be doing there? When she must have so much to attend to, leaving

Tangiers as she was—to Charlotte's great relief—the next day. But there she was, in a part of the house she had never been known to visit. So something, to put it bluntly, must be up. Charlotte sighed, and wished—as so many before her have done—that human beings were not so utterly at the mercy of the unexpected. So true is it that fate's blows fall invariably in that very spot which has been considered of all the most unlikely.

Moved therefore by all these confused feelings and reflections Charlotte continued to listen cautiously for some minutes longer. In order that she might gather some idea of what to expect. For the Princess Mohammed Ali must certainly be on her way to visit her. Though what she could have to say to her Charlotte could not imagine. But when she heard Zeid's crafty mother declare to Fatima that her business was with Charlotte, and, moreover, that she would deliver some message which Fatima must certainly have invented on the spur of the moment, Charlotte shut her door noiselessly and retired swiftly to her balcony again.

Zeid's letter she must certainly hide.

Finally she decided that the safest place would be a crevice in the wall close by her chair.

She therefore folded it into the smallest possible compass and pushed the piece of paper in as far as she could, till not a vestige of it showed.

Then she picked up her book and pretended to read.

Her ears alert for the least sound—at last she heard the door open again and the Princess Mohammed Ali enter her sitting room.

Charlotte called out, "Who's there?"

Smoothly the Princess Mohammed Ali's voice answered her.

"Miss Manisty, pray give yourself the trouble to come in from the balcony—I have a message for you."

Charlotte jumped to her feet, let her novel fall to the ground, and ran back into the room.

"Why, Princess," she cried apparently in the greatest astonishment, "you shouldn't have bothered to come here. Why didn't you send for me? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is," returned the Princess firmly. "But first I will deliver my message."

"Won't you sit down in a comfortable chair?" asked Charlotte.

"Thanks," said the Princess Mohammed Ali, and sank into the nearest seat. Which happened to be the swivel chair before Charlotte's writing table.

"It would seem," she continued acidly, "that my maid, Fatima, was on her way here to deliver to you a message from my sister—was on her way," she repeated stressing the past tense of the verb in her final sentence.

Charlotte decided to make no comment on it.

"A message from my sister——"

"Yes?" asked Charlotte taking care to stand at the old lady's elbow so that she was to a certain extent beyond the range of her basilisk glances. At any rate for the time being.

"It would seem she desires you to visit the Soko tomorrow morning with Monsieur Le Normand, there to make some purchases for her. A strange idea to let you go about this town unchaperoned."

"Thank you—but you shouldn't have troubled over so small a thing—after all I do possess a telephone."

The Princess Mohammed Ali frowned.

"I detest telephones," she said shortly.

Charlotte bent down and, as though she believed the message just delivered her to be genuine, made a neat note on her date card.

The Princess watched the back of her head indolently.

"You have remarkably pretty hair," she said.

Charlotte felt herself flush up.

"Oh!" she returned rather inadequately.

"But I expect you've been told that many times," con-

tinued the Princess blandly. "Also here you would be much admired. You are a type our men do not often see."

Again Charlotte, who had not expected the attack, if there was to be one, to develop along such lines, felt herself color up. At the same time she also experienced a marked rush of dislike for her own sex. "Old cat!" she thought indignantly.

The Princess Mohammed Ali chuckled.

"I know exactly what you are thinking," she said. "You are wishing the old cat would mind her own business and go away. Also you are wondering what on earth I have come prowling up here for. And why I should be inflicting my society on you at this time of night when I should have so much to do as I am leaving Tangiers to-morrow."

Charlotte turned and stared at her.

"Well!" said Charlotte breathlessly.

"Now sit down in that chair, child, and I'll tell you," she continued, indicating a chair beside the table whence she could observe every expression on Charlotte's face with the greatest ease.

Perfectly aware that a man-eating tiger was not more alarming than the woman she now had to deal with, Miss Manisty did as desired.

"Now," said the Princess Mohammed Ali, opening her attack with a very big gun, "how come you to be riding out in the country alone with my son?"

Charlotte did not hesitate.

Since the battle was evidently joined she must keep her end up as well as she was able.

"I was not," she returned flatly, "riding with him."

"But you were seen. Or do you mean—you were not riding alone with the Prince?"

"I was out riding with Mr. Painter."

"Mr. Painter—ah."

"And while we were out—on our way to some silly view that George was determined I should see—Monsieur de Brancas and the Prince Zeid came up. It was quite some

way out in the country. And they insisted on joining us for a short time. Now that was not my affair, I think you'll admit. Since Mr. Painter also knew them both——"

"Well?"

"You would, I imagine, hardly expect me to act the silly schoolgirl and ask them—please to go away!"

In spite of herself Charlotte's cold indignation amused the Princess. And it was in a more friendly tone that she said, "Ah, I fancied Gabrielle had it all wrong."

To this concession Charlotte did not reply, judging it to be one of those occasions in life when speech was less valuable than silence.

"But, at any rate, Gabrielle rightly or wrongly is very jealous of you."

This was another shock between wind and water and therefore extremely shattering to Charlotte's composure.

But, "Me?" she managed to ask in a very injured voice.

"Yes. You see I lay all my cards on the table."

"But why?"

"Why do I lay my cards on the table?"

Charlotte shook her head, "No—why is Gabrielle jealous?"

But the moment she had asked this question she wished she hadn't. Very probably she had now given an advantage to the enemy.

The Princess Mohammed Ali leant back in her chair and looked keenly at Charlotte.

"Don't you know?" she asked.

And when her victim did not reply she continued, "Surely you know she thinks my son takes, shall we say, too great an interest in you, Miss Manisty."

Charlotte managed to look so aghast—but not from those motives which the Princess Mohammed Ali, watching her catlike, imagined—that that redoubtable old dame chuckled again.

"You certainly have an air of the prettiest innocence," she said. "Though I cannot believe that you modern girls

with all your so-called knowledge of life can ever be as ingenuous as your grandmothers really were. However I am sure I have no wish to put any ideas in your head, child," she added, chuckling again.

"Ideas!" said Charlotte disdainfully.

"Sometimes ideas are excellent things. But in this case—— Ah, well, more than probably Gabrielle is the little fool I fancy her to be. But——"

"Yes?" said Charlotte.

The Princess contemplated her lazily, for so long that Charlotte began to feel as though she were the mouse in a terrifyingly subtle cat hunt.

"You do not help me," said the Princess at last.

"Do you expect me to?"

Thus checked for the moment the Princess Mohammed Ali tried another tack.

"Since you seem to possess a certain amount of cool common sense I shall now appeal to that quality in you," she announced.

Charlotte could not help laughing.

"You're the first person who has ever accused me of possessing such a tendency," she returned.

The Princess Mohammed Ali permitted herself to smile.

"Yet you do possess it—it is far more than a mere tendency. I have noticed it many times in the last dynamic month. For this has been in many ways a strange experiment for you, and you have had to adapt yourself, often swiftly. So I am sure you will understand me when I say—that Morocco is not the place for you."

The last eight words of her speech fell on the silence like icicles on frozen water. Charlotte faced her opponent in an astonishment that could almost be felt it was so complete.

"No," continued the Princess, "you have been, and pray do not misunderstand me, I say it with much regret, the cause of great discord in this household."

"Discord?"

"Unfortunately, Mademoiselle. Oh, I do not say it is your fault exactly, my sister should have known better with all her experience than to engage so troubling a beauty as her secretary——"

"Can I help my looks?"

"Again, no. But you cannot blame us for resenting your presence here. Where not only Gabrielle is afraid of you——"

"But that's nonsense——"

Into the Princess Mohammed Ali's heavy-lidded eyes crept a yet more inscrutable expression. And her voice took on an edge. It was not possible that this girl could be really intending to oppose her. That was unthinkable.

She continued slowly, "Not only is Gabrielle afraid of you on account of Zeid. I admit there may be nothing in it. But why should you come and disturb her at what should be her happiest moment? Not only therefore is the situation difficult in the matter of my son and his future wife but my sister and I have been quarrelling quite violently about you for the last ten days. Now I do not desire to disagree with my sister."

"But why disagree on my account? Is she not satisfied with my work? And if I may dare say so, Princess, what affair am I of yours? I was engaged by Madame de Dasulas to be her secretary."

Charlotte was genuinely distressed. Apart from the fact that she had become very fond of her kindly employer it troubled her to think that she could have been the reason for those sulky meals before her holiday. Moreover it was an alarming thought that she should be such an open subject for discord. Any day Madame de Dasulas might get fed up with the situation and dismiss her.

But the Princess Mohammed Ali was still speaking.

"Surely you are aware that Monsieur de Brancas intends to make you a proposal of marriage no later than

to-morrow—at this ball he gives for you. For you, Mademoiselle Manisty," she repeated, in a tone of marked dislike.

The announcement however had a very curious effect on Charlotte. For a sudden, great wave of exultation, even triumph, now swept over her. Here was a way out—after all. If she accepted Monsieur de Brancas—and why should she not?—she need not leave Tangiers. She would still see Zeid now and then. Moreover at one bound—if she accepted him—she would be far beyond all the restrictive influences of her present situation. Certainly she had no personal dislike to the Frenchman. She knew very well what he could offer her. There was much solid satisfaction in that reflection, as also in the one which followed hard upon it—that the Princess Mohammed Ali would then be powerless to interfere in her comings and goings. That was a very pleasing thought. Withal what business was it of hers what Charlotte did as long as she did not steal Zeid from Gabrielle? It appeared they all feared she could do it, though. Well, suppose she did!

But the Princess Mohammed Ali was still speaking, it seemed.

"Now, it will not be convenient for us that Monsieur de Brancas should marry you, Mademoiselle Manisty. No matter how anxious he is to do so. He is too intimately bound up with our family. And you can understand that as his wife——"

"Well," said Charlotte, "what am I to understand?"

"You are young—impulsive; and you might still see a great deal too much of Prince Zeid."

Charlotte jumped to her feet; the more hastily because Zeid's mother was voicing her own idea of a moment before.

"Oh, how dare you?" she cried furiously.

The Princess Mohammed Ali put out a strong arm and pushed Charlotte back into her chair again.

"Don't be a little fool," she said sternly. "Histrionics

never have the slightest effect on me. What I have come for is your solemn promise that you will go to my sister Marie before the week is out and tell her that you must return to England immediately."

"And if I won't?" demanded Charlotte.

The Princess watched her through narrowed eyes. "But you will," she answered and nodded slowly.

She seemed so implacable sitting there that Charlotte became conscious of a sensation of real terror about her heart. For the first time she began to wonder what might happen to her if she opposed this terrible old woman too far.

"It is not as if you were the kind of girl that my son might love—and leave," continued the Princess Mohammed Ali.

"Oh," cried Charlotte in a strangled voice, but all the time her brain was busily trying to formulate some way of escape.

"No, I'll do you the honor to admit that you are of the kind that binds a man with cords that hold. But we are to have nothing of that sort here—nothing. So it will be far best for everybody, and indeed much wiser for you, that you should return as soon as possible to your own country, settle down there, and marry some young man of your own nation."

It was at this moment that in Charlotte's brain there began to sound an obstinate refrain, "But I will see Zeid once more—I will see Zeid once more." And suddenly she heard herself saying in a cool tone, "And what about my fiancé, George Painter?"

"You are engaged to be married?" the Princess Mohammed Ali's accents were those of an unbeliever. "You have certainly kept it very much to yourself, my child."

Charlotte opened wide, innocent eyes. "Kept it to myself —but whom should I tell? Nobody is interested in me here. Besides George only asked me to marry him the afternoon I was out riding with him. He was in the middle of it when the—the—others arrived."

"And you accepted him?"

"Yes," said Charlotte.

The Princess Mohammed Ali rose ponderously from her chair.

"In that case," she said, cryptically, "there is no more to be said. Forget what I have been talking about. Let it be as though the sea had washed over the sand. And I will wish you good-night, Mademoiselle Manisty."

3.

Once perfectly certain that she was alone and that no one stirred in the whole length of the corridor outside, Charlotte slipped to her telephone and rang a number.

In his room in the hotel which overlooked the busy seashore and inconvenient harbor George Painter heard the insistent ring of his own 'phone for some seconds before he came in from his balcony to answer it.

With the receiver at his ear he was surprised to hear Charlotte's voice.

"George—George," she said, low but insistently, "are you alone?"

"Yes, quite. Why?"

There was a momentary hesitation at the other end of the line before Charlotte spoke again.

"George, are you still in a temper with me?"

"That's hardly the way to put it. I never was in a temper. I told you what I thought about certain things—and still do for that matter."

"Yes, I know——"

Again she seemed to hesitate.

"George——"

"Well?"

"If anyone asks you—we are—engaged."

"What?"

His voice was quite shrill with astonishment and emotion.

"Don't shout like that. You nearly broke my ear-drum."

"Please repeat what you said just now."

"I said—we are engaged."

"Great jumping Methuselah!"

"Do I take that to mark enthusiasm—or what?"

"To be married?" George in the chaotic state of mind engendered by this astounding piece of news was yet determined to have it all quite clear. "To be married?" he repeated.

"Certainly—that is usually the end of an engagement, isn't it? Unless it's broken off."

A gasping George now muttered hoarsely, "Oh, Charlotte, you don't mean to say you've changed your mind."

At the other end he distinctly heard her gurgle, "Circumstances over which I had no control conspired to make me, George. Yes, distinctly circumstances over which I had no control—very massive ones."

George began to splutter. There were so many things he wanted to say. But, as usual, Charlotte had managed to take him completely unawares and whirl him off his feet into a maze of conflicting emotions.

"Well, well—oh, Lord—Charlotte!"

"What is it now?"

"You're sure you mean what you say?"

"George!" Her voice was full of the most delicate reproach.

Feeling very guilty he hastened to retrieve the blunder.

"I didn't really mean that, of course. But you knocked me all of a heap. Honestly, Charlotte, I didn't intend to say that—it just slipped out."

"I hope you didn't. It's not a very complimentary thought. Well, what is it now?"

For he was babbling incoherently at his end of the wire.

"I shan't be able to see you for a week at least, Charlotte," he ended in a wail.

"Why not?"

"It would come now—that's the general cussedness of

life. But I'm off with a party to Fez—at dawn tomorrow."

"No, really?"

"That means nearly four days inland. Oh, curse it, I can't put it off, either."

"You're sure you can't put it off?" There was a trace of anxiety in the question which George took happily to himself.

"No—hard luck. It's the French Commandant who's arranged it all for me. It's a long story—but I don't see how I can back out now."

"Certainly not. We shall have lots of time to—to—talk things over. Think of your career, George."

"I'd much rather think about you."

His voice sounded so wistful that for a moment Charlotte hesitated about walking further down the road she had chosen. Just then it seemed very hard on George that she should use him, as she intended doing, to get herself out of a difficulty. When she had no intention of ever marrying him.

"I'm not really worth thinking about," she said finally. "Well, I must ring off. Good-night, George. Whatever you do, don't endow me with pearls."

"Charlotte, Charlotte, wait a moment."

"Well?"

"I'll rush in and see you the moment I get back."

"Better ring me up first. I might be on duty you know."

"All right—hard luck I can't kiss you, Lotta. But at least you've said 'yes.' By Jove, I feel like going out and shouting at the top of my voice."

Her amused, cool tone broke in, "I shouldn't do that. You might get arrested in this town. And oh, George, will you do something for me?"

"I should rather think I would. What is it?"

"It's quite easy. If anyone asks you how long we've been engaged—please say, since the day we went out riding together to see that view."

"But—why on earth?"

"Stupid!" But her voice held all the caressing languor of Lilith in its tones. "Can't you see I mightn't want to remember that I had to ring you up and say—I'd changed my mind?"

Put thus George was only too flattered.

"Right'o. But thank the pigs, you did change your mind."

"And if you don't ring off now, George, I may change it again. I'm terribly sleepy."

The sound of a not very deftly smothered yawn came over the wire to him. Again George laughed. This was a Charlotte he knew intimately.

"Good-night then, lovely one. Pleasant dreams."

And he returned to his pipe and his chair on the balcony outside his room with his head buzzing with a thousand new plans and hopes.

"Great guns, she's going to marry me after all."

One is indeed a little sorry for George at this particular juncture.

But it was on this stimulating thought that he ultimately fell asleep.

However the next morning, when he became the recipient of a note which made him mutter and pull at his mustache, he slid back to his old view that Charlotte should never have come to Morocco, that land of intrigue and strange passions. For in it was a message which roused again in him all his old, uneasy fears of her, and what her present environment might do to her.

The note—a short one and typewritten—was as follows: "Keep Charlotte Manisty to her engagement with you. And take her out of the country as soon as you can. Or she may yet give you the slip. She has no conscience—she is a common cheat."

The missive was unsigned.

CHAPTER 10

Her sister Laure, as much to her secret relief as to Charlotte's, well started on her journey to her own home in the mountains beyond Marrakesch, Gabrielle, too, wholly recovered from her late burst of ill humor over Zeid's obstinate choosing of just this week in which to depart mysteriously desertwards on some errand of his own—the object of which he refused to reveal to her—but now contentedly occupied with the final composition of her trousseau and no less than two wedding dresses, Marie de Dasulas came to the conclusion that, on the whole, the time had distinctly arrived wherein she must make some effort to redeem her promise to Claude de Brancas. And turning her attention on Charlotte's affairs perhaps get the child really brilliantly settled in life.

His recent suggestion that she should herself sound her secretary on the subject of an early alliance with him she had welcomed. Saving as it would his face should Charlotte definitely turn down his proposal. Moreover it would permit her to estimate, she hoped, in the course of the conversation which must follow just how much, or how little, chance of happiness her old friend would have if the English girl showed herself willing to take him for a husband.

Still by no means enthusiastic over the prospect of having to accept Charlotte Manisty as an integral part of their most intimate circle she by no means felt the same strong aversion to the idea which her sister had expressed latterly, and in the most forcible language, while she was too honest to deny that propinquity had added rather than detracted from the girl's curious, careless charm. Furthermore Marie

de Dasulas felt obliged to acknowledge that after having had Charlotte about her for quite three months, and these by no means easy ones—filled as they had been with all the anxieties and uncertainties attendant on Zeid's far from ideal wooing of Gabrielle—she had developed qualities of good nature and obligingness, added to a certain gaiety of soul, which were very attractive in a household that was mainly elderly and set. Against Gabrielle's far more exacting nature her easy-going calm showed most engagingly. Moreover, that she had been an uncommonly efficient secretary Madame de Dasulas was perfectly ready to admit. But the qualities which render a secretary ideal are not always those needed in a wife. Again that the two girls had not made friends to any great extent did not trouble her. For this she put down to the fact that Charlotte led a busy life from morning to night and her little cousin an entirely indolent one given over to amusement. Probably the girls did have little in common—both in tastes and in interests. But what Marie de Dasulas was quite unaware of was that from the first Gabrielle had suspected Charlotte of being Zeid's idol. But as that impetuous young man had raised no further objections to his marriage—since the one poignant scene with which he had favored her the night before her sister Laure had arrived in Tangiers his Aunt Marie, if she ever did waste a thought over his dramatic admission that the girl to whom his heart was given was in Morocco, certainly imagined that nebulous inamorata of his to have been some tourist long since gone back to her own country. And now presumably completely forgotten by him.

Therefore on the morning of the day on which De Brancas was giving his entertainment she was in happy ignorance of all those warring interests about her, and saw no reason to suspect that this might not be the proper moment in which to sound Charlotte on her views about a foreign marriage.

During the preceding hour and a half in which, as usual,

they had been going through the morning's mail Madame de Dasulas had, with this thought uppermost, been more than usually cordial and motherly in her manner to a very sweet, low-voiced Charlotte. But as they worked steadily through final lists of wedding guests, acceptances, refusals—though few of these—and arrangements for Gabrielle's wedding, she noticed with concern that Charlotte looked as though she had spent a sleepless night and appeared depressed and absent-minded. This was so unlike her usual breezy style that Marie de Dasulas found herself wondering if the child could have received any troublesome news from home. However, a glance at the clock warning her that she had not too much time left in which to broach that subject which was so important to the happiness of Claude de Brancas she decided to waste no more precious moments in ascertaining the reason for Charlotte's pallor and general air of tristesse. A regrettable decision, had she but known. For in Charlotte's present mood of uncertainty she might have learned something from her of the happenings of the night before, and have been thereby saved much future distress of soul.

For Charlotte, already regarding her actions of the last twelve hours—reviewed by the colder light of morning—as strategical errors of the first importance, would have been only too ready to fall a victim to the first astute cross-examining mind. And wretched as she was now about the whole absurd impulse which had landed her in George's willing arms—again, metaphorically speaking at present—would have dearly loved to confide in some older, dependable woman. But the moment, heavy with fate, passed—and no word was said.

"Ten days more," finally sighed Madame de Dasulas. "Dear Zeid—how strange it will be when he goes to Asrah Jabal with his wife. I shall grieve over losing him."

"I expect you will," returned Charlotte sympathetically.

"It is always different when a young man marries. He becomes absorbed in an entirely new set of circumstances. To most people he is no longer at all interesting."

"The Prince Zeid would always be interesting, I should think."

Madame de Dasulas glanced up from the scattered sheets of paper on the desk before her. "Did you find him so? I had an idea you did not like him."

Charlotte continued to make shorthand notes industriously.

"I always fancied he disliked me."

Madame de Dasulas looked concerned.

"Oh, no," she returned, "but Zeid is rather shy."

Remembering what she had always found him, quite overbearing and utterly sure of himself, Charlotte was hard put to it not to laugh heartily. As it was a smile crept slyly about the corners of her mouth, which, luckily, Madame de Dasulas did not perceive.

"Well, we shall be very quiet without our young people."

It was at this point that Charlotte decided that she ought to ask her employer if she should not go home as soon as the wedding was over. Or perhaps before, even?

But Marie de Dasulas appeared very surprised and even a little hurt at the idea.

"But why? Aren't you happy here?"

Charlotte nodded.

"I thought maybe you weren't quite satisfied with me."

"Not quite satisfied? Whatever put that in your head? Not my sister Laure, I hope. But if she did you are not to take any notice of her."

Charlotte said rather shyly, "I fancied the other day—at lunch—you were not pleased about something."

Marie de Dasulas patted the arm of her big, easy chair. "Come and sit here," she said, "I have something to say to you. If I was displeased the other day it was with Laure and Gabrielle—not you."

2.

Up to the hour of eight when Charlotte got up from the dinner table which had seemed to her overtired brain to be one of spitefully silent menace on the part of Zeid's future wife, even if of kindly solicitude as far as Madame de Dasulas was concerned, and fled to the empty peace of her own rooms—there to finally answer the question put so tactfully to her by Marie de Dasulas that morning—she was still quite vague as to what her future actions were to be. Though for close upon nine hours she had been debating endlessly the question—did she dare cut the Gordian knot of her present impasse by accepting the proposal of Claude de Brancas or not? Again and again she found herself meditating upon the ill fortune which should have denied her the knowledge of his intentions till it was really too late. If only she had had the slightest idea that he seriously projected asking her to marry him even twenty-four hours sooner. Then the whole situation would have been so very different. She would never have taken that stupid step with regard to George. But now—with a gesture very like despair, Charlotte hesitated before the closed door of her bedroom and almost dared not open it.

Over and over again, all day, had rung in her distracted head, as they were sounding now, the concluding words of Madame de Dasulas' long talk with her that morning.

"When you go upstairs to dress for the dance to-night, my dear, you will find you have a choice of two frocks. Both new ones. The pale green is a present from me which you are to keep whatever happens. But the white chiffon with crystal embroideries—which is a really lovely creation—is much more significant. That has been sent you by Claude. That, and the ornaments which are to go with it. Now you shall have the whole day to think it over, Charlotte. But if you put on the white frock and

those ornaments we shall know that you have decided to say—yes."

Faced with a temptation for one of her nature that was so overpoweringly strong Charlotte had done what she had so often allowed herself to do in difficult situations in years gone by. She had let hour after hour slip away, continually postponing the moment when she must face facts and come to a definite decision. Going about her usual afternoon duties in a kind of dream she kept reminding herself that there was still plenty of time and she need not too hastily make up her mind, whenever a curious kind of panic invaded her. Yet all the while she suspected her mind to be already made up and that, when it came to the actual moment, Madame de Dasulas' frock of green would not be worn by her.

And yet the horrid thought assailed her continually—dared she bid defiance to the Princess Mohammed Ali and take the course she longed to choose? For some deep rooted instinct constantly warned her that if she became the Baronne de Brancas she would as certainly incur the lifelong enmity of Zeid's mother. And that, furthermore, the redoubtable matron would shrink from no action, however violent, which would remove Charlotte from her path.

North Africa was decidedly not England.

"I shall certainly have to give Tangiers a wide berth in the future," she reflected. "For I shall never dare to say a word about it to Claude if——"

Suddenly a cold anger welled up in her.

Why should she be forced to sacrifice what might be the great chance of her life solely on account of the opposition of an imperious and tyrannical old woman of whose existence only four months before she was entirely unaware? Why should she have to accept in place of a life of real charm and comfort—a wilderness of sweets for her indeed—one of dull routine merely because an old, tortuous

minded woman refused to accept a situation to which nobody else made the slightest objection? When her own sister, too, had been at particular pains to point out to Charlotte every advantage attaching to the position of Claude de Brancas' wife.

Turning away from the door of her bedroom towards which she had been slowly gravitating Charlotte now began to walk restlessly up and down her sitting room.

More than once she glanced nervously at her clock on the writing table. But she still had at least two more hours before she must leave the house with her mind made up.

Hastily smoking cigarette after cigarette, a whirl of misgivings, fearful resentments, arguments, excuses, filling her harassed brain, she paced up and down the length and breadth of the room.

Outside in the fragrant night a large, bland moon swung slowly through the heavens.

"I wonder what will have happened before I see her to-morrow night," thought Charlotte as she stepped into her balcony for a breath of air.

The sound of some Arab boy playing his flute in the lane beyond the garden sent her thoughts back to that evening when De Brancas had found her sitting solitary on the seat by that tiled pavement which surrounded the artificial and limpid pool of water in the center of it.

To-night it was as always, as far as she could see, empty of everything but flowers and the dark shadows of the cypress and ilex trees.

Stray scraps of the Frenchman's conversation on that past occasion floated to the surface of her agitated mind.

"Even then he must have been thinking of me, I suppose," she mused. "I only wish he had made himself more clear. Odd, it never occurred to me then. And so to-night I am what they call on the horns of a dilemma."

Leaning over the balcony she began to laugh softly.

"On one side stands Monsieur de Brancas with heaps of money and all I most want. Leisure, position, pleasant

people, an excellent income. And he would not be too exacting, though he's twenty years older than I am—if he's a day. Well, well, I declare I'm quite like the poor heroine in the movies. Only Claude is really a nice chap and no villain. And I've no special shrinking from him."

Again her laugh floated over the silent garden.

"I believe I could make him a very decent wife on the whole."

Carelessly her eyes surveyed the prospect of grass, and pool, and distant, high, encompassing wall, which gleamed whitely. Perhaps it was this canescence of the wall which made her blind to that glimmer of snowy linen that stirred behind a rosebush and caught her eye but not her mind.

"And on the other side," continued Charlotte to herself, even rather amused by the picture she was painting, "stands the poor, hardworking young fellow. All over principle, and fine words about getting on, and taking life together. Rather like a pill. In short—George. And the real truth of the matter is George bores me stiff. And I fancy in time I could even get to hate him."

Sighing deeply she blew a dozen smoke rings into the flower scented air one after another and stabbed the center of each perfect circle with the glowing end of her cigarette.

"That's quite a gymnastic performance," she said out loud in a satisfied tone. Then reverting to her earlier meditations she added, also aloud, "And I promised Hilda most solemnly, too, that I would not do it. Yet technically speaking I am certainly now engaged to George."

Idly she listened for a little while longer to the long drawn out and piercing sweetness of the unseen flute player.

At last she sighed, "The devil take George! I wonder if that boy out there is in the same quandary with all his girls as I am with my young men."

For the last time she laughed and turning swiftly went indoors.

Still avoiding the shut door of her bedroom she flung herself into an armchair facing it.

"Then there's Zeid with his absurd letter. Of course I must take no notice of that. I think I'd better leave it in that hole in the wall where I stuffed it last night. It's safer there than anywhere else in this house, I suppose."

The thought of Zeid and his urgent epistle brought Gabrielle back into her mind again. Charlotte began to wonder what that brooding air of hers had meant at dinner time. Again she became conscious of an uneasy sense of impending fate.

Then, as if her thought had conjured up the girl herself, the door of her room suddenly opened and Gabrielle stood there regarding her smilingly.

Coldly Charlotte stared back at the charming apparition in its rose and gold draperies; dark hair bound proudly with Zeid's golden filigree fillet. About her neck his chain of perfect pearls.

"Why, Gabrielle!" she cried sharply. "In Heaven's name how long have you been there?"

The French girl continued to smile at her.

"But a moment or two. I knocked—but got no answer. So I came in. Then I saw you were out on the balcony, so I slipped into your bedroom to have a peep at your new finery."

Charlotte frowned—such cool presumption annoyed her extremely.

"Have a cigarette," she said, "and tell me what you really came here for."

Gabrielle flitted up to the table, took a cigarette and, lighting it, flung herself into another easy chair close by her unwilling hostess.

"Don't you believe me?" she laughed. "I assure you it's the truth, Charlotte. I came up here—and I hope you don't mind—because Cousin Marie told me she had presented you with a lovely new frock for this evening's

party. As she did not tell me what color it was I was frightfully curious to see it. You may guess I was not anxious that you and I should clash. I had so set my heart on wearing this pink frock of which Zeid has always been so fond. But I would have had to change it had Cousin Marie's gift been rose color, for instance."

"I never wear pink," returned Charlotte coldly. "That color does not suit me."

"No, I suppose you are much too fair. But you would look very well in black. That is always so flattering to blondes."

Charlotte laughed.

"Perhaps you think I should be wearing that to-night."

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know that I quite understand what you mean. Has anything happened to upset you—you are surely not cross to-night, Charlotte? But shouldn't you be dressing now?"

Charlotte ignored the first question.

"There's plenty of time," she said, replying to the second.

"Not quite an hour. Don't forget Cousin Marie hates to be kept waiting."

"I shall not keep her waiting."

Gabrielle arranged a pillow more comfortably behind her head.

"I must confess I like lots of time to dress in—before I go to a dance," she remarked pleasantly.

"Dances are beginning to mean nothing to me," returned Charlotte to this, and actually believed she meant what she said.

"But how ridiculous! You are much too young to feel like that. Perhaps in another ten years—except that, perhaps, now you are engaged——"

A look of the greatest astonishment appeared on Charlotte's face.

"Engaged? What do you mean?"

Almost tauntingly Gabrielle met her doubtful glance.

"It isn't possible that my Cousin Laure could have misunderstood you——"

"Oh, that's where you heard it."

Gabrielle nodded.

"Yes, she told me this morning just before she left for Asrah Jabal. I suppose I ought to congratulate you."

"Thanks. But what on earth made her tell you?"

Gabrielle assumed an air of innocent rather offended surprise.

"Was it to be kept a secret? I am so sorry if I have said something I shouldn't have."

Charlotte could have shaken the interfering little busybody till her teeth rattled in her head, so furious was she at finding her ace trumped in this manner. It was too dangerous that Gabrielle, of all people, should hold so important a piece of information. Before long that she was engaged to George would be known all over Tangiers, reflected Charlotte miserably. At once her brain was at work to try and destroy the advantage this item of knowledge gave to Zeid's future wife. Therefore, now completely embarked on a sea of lying, Charlotte drew a deep breath and said firmly, "George and I have—we are no longer engaged."

This made Gabrielle sit up.

"Is that why you are wearing no ring?" she asked. "But it is not possible——"

"Not possible?"

"After so short a time——"

Charlotte broke in.

"We—we had a quarrel."

"Oh, but you will make that up. All lovers quarrel at times. Even Zeid and I——"

"Never."

Charlotte was more than decided.

Gabrielle put out the butt end of her cigarette on a bronze leaf at her elbow.

"And when did you disagree?" she asked offensively. It

was quite obvious that she did not believe a word Charlotte was saying.

"What has that to do with you?"

"Nothing—but it would be interesting to know——"

"I see no reason why it should interest you."

Gabrielle jumped to her feet.

"Now, Charlotte, don't be silly," she cried. "As if I would allow you to quarrel with me to-night of all nights. I know quite well you don't like me——"

"Oh, nonsense," said Charlotte.

"But look at the time—you simply must go and dress," she went on quickly.

Very unwillingly Charlotte's eyes followed her pointing finger. The moment she so dreaded had actually arrived. There was no putting it off any more.

"I'll wait in here for you," continued Gabrielle, "then if you should want me to help you—or you should want your frock hooked up——"

"All right," said Charlotte, and went into her bedroom shutting the door firmly behind her.

Left alone the French girl roamed about the long room for a few moments looking at this and that and humming a coquettish little song just above her breath. Then with one last furtive and backward glance to make sure that nobody could possibly be on hand to observe her singularly questionable movements she slipped onto the balcony where she remained for some considerable time.

But whatever she did out there, or, possibly, whatever she found did not improve a naturally volcanic temper. For she came in again looking furiously angry though at the same time there was a distinct air of triumph about her.

Then for the next ten minutes she sat in her old seat, smoking a cigarette, and watching Charlotte's closed door very much as a cat does a mouse hole.

Once, however, she jumped up to walk over to the writing table where she scribbled, very hurriedly, a few lines on a half sheet of paper in halting Arabic; enclosing these in an

envelope which she sealed up but did not address. This she slipped inside the front of her dress. Finally she pulled towards her that large, flat, glass dish in which reposed Charlotte's stamp sponge and filled it full of ink.

"Though I may not have to use it," she murmured cryptically, "if my Cousin Laure is right in her opinion of Charlotte." Then she went back to her chair again.

Her eyes were on the clock when, at last, the door opened slowly and Charlotte appeared hesitatingly on its threshold.

It was a transformed, beautiful, flushed Charlotte—whose delicate green frock became her enormously.

But the eyes of Gabrielle Davonier flashed and then narrowed.

"Charlotte, you look absolutely lovely," she cried, with a perfectly simulated, false enthusiasm. "But what made you choose the green? Is it your favorite color? Green to me always seems a little unlucky."

Decidedly snappily, having made her great renunciation which she was now already regretting, Charlotte said morosely, "No—and it's not unlucky, either." Then walking across the room to Gabrielle she suggested that she might be decent enough to hook her frock up on the shoulder, which had been giving her considerable trouble.

"I do so detest a dress that fastens up on the shoulder," she grumbled.

Jumping up from her chair Gabrielle pulled her across the room to the writing table.

"Come over here," she cried peremptorily, "where there is at least some light. How you can stand a room the lights of which are so heavily shaded I cannot understand. It is a kind of twilight in which one moves. It may be very soulful, and artistic, and all that but I prefer plenty of light myself."

Indifferently, lost in thought, Charlotte allowed herself to be pushed within the circle of light from the lamp on her writing table and remained standing patiently by it taking very little notice of Gabrielle's actions while the

French girl's busy fingers lightly fastened snaps, pulled out frills, and arranged the tiny bunches of silver flowers which finished off the ends of the wide ribbon about her waist. Suddenly she uttered a loud exclamation of dismay.

"What is it?" asked Charlotte, coming out of her brown study.

"But, my dear, you can't possibly wear this frock. It's too bad. Did you not notice in putting it on that it had a great mark across the skirt? These dressmakers are too careless. And it is terribly apparent. Also unfortunately, if you look at the time, you will see it is too late now to try to clean it up. What a misfortune!"

The high pitched, monotonous tones flowed on and on till Charlotte could have screamed.

In unconcealed, plain panic she ran back into her bedroom to stare with widely open, affrighted eyes, over the flowers upon her shoulder, at the skirt of her dress in the looking-glass. It was only too true. There—upon the delicate flounces of green tulle spread a great blot of what looked to her very much like ink.

"How could it have got there?" she cried. "And what am I to do now?"

Very much more slowly Gabrielle had followed her into the room.

"Do?" she laughed, and pointed to the bed, whereon still lay that exquisite cloud of white chiffon which Claude de Brancas had sent for Charlotte's adornment. "Why, wear this other one, of course. How lucky that Cousin Marie should have been generous enough to give you two. Besides this white one is really very much the prettier."

Running over to the bed she picked up the blue leather, coronetted case lying half hidden under its folds, and, opening it, held up the circlet of brilliants high in the air that up to then had lain hidden within it.

"Look at this lovely ornament," she cried, "which she evidently intends you to wear also. And there is a neck-

lace in that second case. Come, Charlotte, for goodness' sake don't look so horror struck. One would imagine you to be staring at a snake. I'll help you to dress. I can be a very good lady's maid when I like——"

Charlotte muttered, "So can the devil, I expect."

"What did you say about the devil? Needs must when he drives, you know. Come, with any luck we shan't be more than a few minutes late."

CHAPTER 11

However, that same night of conspiracies and inexorable warfare it was written in the book of destiny that there should be, though neither was then aware of the other's whereabouts or intentions, two extremely resolute and high-tempered young men converging rapidly on the city of Tangiers and Charlotte. Both moving as swiftly as a horse, in the one case, and a motor, in the other, would allow.

George Painter, who had done his best to set his face and his unruly thoughts steadily towards his mission in distant Fez—that walled and secret city of the Moor surrounded by green hills—until the early hours of the afternoon, suddenly succumbed to a gnawing fit of jealousy, which in the end forced him, against his cooler judgment, to turn and retrace his road Tangierwards.

This may have been partly because the two French officers—talkative fellows both—with whom he was travelling were so lyrically outspoken and eloquent in their regrets at having to miss De Brancas' ball that night. But mainly his decision was made because, quite suddenly, George remembered to have heard somewhere that Charlotte was to be its chief ornament. This was a most unpleasing, even alarming, reflection. And caused him to abandon incontinently—temporarily at any rate—his expedition into the interior. Let his editor wait—for once. George had more pressing affairs to attend to than mere Moroccan politics. So much devotion as Claude de Brancas was showing Charlotte could only mean one thing. And with that agitating letter of the morning still in his pocket-book George found himself speculating mistrustfully just

how far she might remain loyal to her engagement to him under a pressure so insistent as that which De Brancas could apply. The writer of the anonymous missive had known too well what she was about—George had decided it was a female pen—when she warned him of Charlotte's insecure and volatile nature. Too well he knew, he reflected ruefully, how far from enthusiastic she had always been over a marriage state which connoted more or less stringency of means. Very likely she would hand him the mitten—or try to. Well, let her try. She would not find him such an easy mark as she seemed to imagine.

Therefore after some eloquent and gesticulatory arguments with his cheerful hosts he prevailed on them to head their car again for Tangiers—though as they warned him they could not possibly reach the gates of the city till midnight—on the understanding that no matter what happened they were all three to restart their journey at dawn the next morning. So only could they avoid the censure of their superiors.

Zeid had awakened in one of his obstinate moods. And abandoning his search in the vicinity of Tangiers for an elusive Ahmed Kamedo, with whom his mother for some reason of her own had desired him to come to some kind of understanding and at this precise moment, issued stringent orders to his followers, at an early hour, to about face and ride with him again to the city of the Straits. That is to say he bade them accompany him to a point some two miles beyond the city gates there to wait till he returned to them. What he intended doing within the walls of Tangiers he confided to no one. Also he made it quite clear to those who were nearest him, and therefore inclined to lecture him on his enigmatical errand, that he intended to compass it entirely alone. He would not be followed—he made that most distinctly understood.

Therefore all through the hot afternoon they rode headlong—and on into the silence of the moonlit night without drawing rein.

In the garden of the Villa of the Nightingales, behind her rosebush, Fatima still squatted unmoving as a piece of statuary wrapped in her heavy, all-enveloping veil. Only there was now tucked somewhere in its folds that mysterious envelope which Gabrielle had managed to drop unseen from the balcony of Charlotte's room before she left it with a newly garbed bride-like figure beside her. A figure that moved beside her as though in a dream.

The vast white house of Claude de Brancas set in the midst of its magnificent gardens overlooking the wide, rolling Atlantic was ablaze with lights when Madame de Dasulas' roomy motor purred into its courtyard. Beyond a long pergola a vista of skilfully illuminated gardens was visible. Myriads of tiny lamps outlined vaguely here a tree, there a fountain, now a lawn, and in the distance many paths.

A military band was playing a selection of popular airs, from some light opera, near the portico under which, in its turn, the car drew up before the widely opened front door,

Within the house there were more brilliant lights; and rooms and passages beautifully decorated with flowers.

The marble galleries which ran round three sides of the hall were festooned with roses.

A crowd of people had already filled the galleries and the immense, cool rooms.

At the head of the stairs stood the distinguished Frenchman, their host, receiving the chattering, gay, cosmopolitan assembly. There was a scent of jasmine in the air. Somewhere in the distance an orchestra was playing alluringly.

"Now," said Madame de Dasulas, "as soon as we have taken off our wraps I shall take you two girls into the ballroom and lose you. Recollect I do not expect to see you till supper time. For I do not imagine that you will lack for partners. So both of you go and dance, and enjoy yourselves. And when the time comes, Charlotte, you will find that Claude will tell you what he wishes you to do."

Gabrielle stared at Charlotte curiously.

"What a cryptic sentence, Cousin Marie," she laughed. "Do we make an entrance, then?" she added lightly.

Madame de Dasulas laughed.

"We—no. It will be Charlotte at whom he will look to-night."

But to Gabrielle's surprise after this assertion when Charlotte's delicately beautiful figure came towards him, crowned with his circlet of brilliants, he merely smiled very kindly at her and let her follow his old friend, and Gabrielle, into the great ballroom with its polished floor. Nor did he even turn his head to watch her go. She was wearing the frock he had taken so much trouble to design, his necklace was about her young neck—he could patiently await the psychological moment now.

Surrounded by eager young men it was not long before she and Gabrielle were dancing, and talking, and presumably enjoying the flying hours.

Only to Charlotte there was a curious dream-like quality over the whole evening and about every person with whom she danced or conversed.

It was about midnight that Claude de Brancas came towards her and claimed her for a waltz.

And at that same moment at two different points, two resolute young men were entering the city.

In his arms Charlotte floated about the ballroom still with that curious unreal feeling upon her.

"Though I must," she thought, "explain it all to him."

And yet she knew she would find this a far from easy task for the man certainly attracted her far more than George. If she had to lose him it would be with a feeling of honest regret. Though his possessions with an infinitely greater. Charlotte was always quite honest with herself. Yet she supposed she must do the decent thing and, laying the case before him, leave it to him as to whether he would still wish to make her his wife. She would not be able to deny that she had played fast and loose with poor George

Painter whom, by this time, she was quite certain no power on earth could make her marry.

Thus reflecting she allowed Monsieur de Brancas to lead her into the garden and to a distant terrace, more or less enclosed by cypress trees, whence they could see the moonlit waves of the Atlantic beating upon the shore, hundreds of feet below.

With a curious sense of detached amusement Charlotte thought, "At least he has brought me to a romantic spot enough. But now—here goes—I suppose."

Claude de Brancas seated himself on the stone bench beside her.

"Now I do not want you to think," he began, "that I expect of you all those trepidations and flutterings that a marriage of inclination arouses in a young girl. If you remember some time ago we had a conversation on this very subject——"

"Yes," said Charlotte.

"Well," he continued, "the fact that you, my dear child, are willing to become my wife is at this moment happiness enough for me."

A wave of impulsively warm feeling invaded Charlotte.

"You are so much too good to me," she began, "and I am such a selfish little pig—that I feel I ought to tell you——"

"Tell me nothing," he interrupted her quickly. "It is sufficient that you are willing to be my wife."

His look was so tenderly affectionate rather than passionate that Charlotte thought—"Oh, it's going to be more difficult than I expected. How can I hurt him so—now? I must wait my opportunity, I suppose."

And she sighed lightly.

After all very mercifully George was a long way off by now. Perhaps her confession about the present situation in which she found herself could wait. Why destroy a very charming moment? Why not dismiss these anxious thoughts that continually thronged in upon her?

So it was with a complete change of mood that she turned once more to Claude de Brancas.

"When the time comes I will try to be a good wife to you —Claude," she said softly.

"My dear, my dear," he said, and bent to kiss her hand.

It was after this that he began to describe to her the kind of entrancing life he meant her to enjoy by his side in Paris. Names of historic places she had often longed to visit jostled against names of equally fascinating, and great, Parisian dressmakers and jewelers in his talk.

"There is nothing you shall not have," he promised her gaily.

"Yet I certainly don't deserve it," observed Charlotte.

"Deserve! Nonsense!" he laughed. "And then it's so dear of you to have worn my frock——"

"It's the most beautiful one I've ever had on."

"But you shall have many more. And my brilliants become you, child. But later on you shall wear more exquisite jewels, I promise you. There is a necklace in the Rue de la Paix I have long had my eye on——"

"For me?"

De Brancas nodded.

"You must know I fell head over ears in love with you the very first day I saw you—and on the Channel boat. You were watching the baggage going into the hold——"

"Not a very romantic occupation," said Charlotte.

"Romance, like life, catches us when least we expect it," he returned.

Charlotte laughed. "I think I ought to tell you, at least, that I am quite without romance of any kind."

But he shook his head.

"That is not the case," he told her. "Although perhaps up to now neither life nor romance has touched you on the shoulder. But they will, my dear Charlotte, they will—do not doubt it."

He sighed and looked away over the rolling waves far into the distance.

"But you must be patient—though your romance may not be as it is for other girls of your age. I am, I know, many years older than you. But there are many ways of romance."

"Many ways?"

"As many as there are people," he said.

"Oh," said Charlotte. "Just like opinions, then."

But the subject so carelessly touched on rendered her for some obscure reason decidedly melancholy and it was with a distinct feeling of relief that she now heard him say, "Charlotte, you will let me announce our engagement at supper to-night?"

For there was to be a huge, formal, French affair around the hour of one o'clock.

"Are you sure you want to? Wouldn't it be better if——"

But he refused to listen to any objections on her part. And taking her left hand in his said, "No, I have quite made up my mind—I shall run no risk of you altering your views. And here is something I want you to wear."

With that he slipped on the third finger of her left hand a magnificent emerald set with diamonds.

"Oh," cried Charlotte, "but that is far too grand a ring for me."

"No, no. There," he continued, "now we can face the world together."

Somehow the sentence reminded Charlotte disagreeably of the absent George. Who was even then striding purposefully towards the heights whereon De Brancas' house and gardens stood.

"I really think——" she began firmly. "Yes, I am sure I ought to tell you that——"

"You don't mean to say you dislike emeralds?"

"No—no. It's nothing about emeralds."

But he would not listen to her.

"Then that is all right."

Taking her hand in his and tucking it within his arm he pulled her up from the seat.

"Now we must return to the house, dear child. For, after all, much as I would prefer to stay here with you—yet I have guests to-night and must not neglect them too long."

Her arm in his they went back to the ballroom where he handed her over to a distracted young man who apparently had been searching wildly for her in the most inaccessible places for a very long period of time.

"And this tango is very near over," he grumbled. "And I had promised myself the pleasure of dancing with you. For you dance the tango better than any other girl I know."

"Many thanks for the recommendation," said Charlotte.

"Where have you been all this long time?" he demanded as they dipped and glided featly.

"Oh, out in the garden—looking at the sad sea waves."

"I'll swear you weren't alone."

"What do you think?" gibed Charlotte.

His lynx eye fell to her new acquisition.

"Do we have to congratulate you?" he demanded sombrely.

"In a little while, perhaps," admitted Charlotte.

2.

Zeid in his native dress with its belt of the brightest red leather studded with rough bits of turquoise and coral in which were thrust a wicked looking curved knife and a pistol, and wrapped in the all enveloping, ample folds of the universally worn white woolen haik, rode as rapidly through the narrow, teeming streets of Tangiers as the crowds of men and beasts of burden would allow him, late though the hour was, till he reached those wider roads—French-built—of the foreign quarter wherein surrounded by their high whitewashed walls stood the houses of the European residents. There within sight and sound of the sea was his Aunt Marie's rambling, comfortable residence.

As his mare picked her careful, dainty way amongst the inequalities of the roadway Zeid wondering what he should first say to Charlotte and how he could best reach her room without being perceived by some other member of the household should anyone be awake. For he had not the slightest intention of entering by the front door, nor of encountering anyone but Charlotte that night if he could possibly avoid it. The hour itself being sufficiently unconventional, let alone his business.

Young ladies—if there are any left in these turbulent days of freedom and self expression—certainly in cosmopolitan communities like that of Tangiers do not make it a practice to receive the visits of their admirers towards the small hours of the morning. Be the moon never so bright, or their brittle, modern outlook unscathed by human experience.

As to the manner of his reaching his objective, which was that tranquil, empty garden that as a child he had known so well and which he knew the windows of her room to overlook, there lay in the pouch which hung from his belt an ancient, intricately worked, brass key. With this instrument he intended opening the concealed door in the wall which separated the equally deserted lane from its beauties of leaf and flower, and to which the flute player so often came to make clear through melancholy melody.

As Zeid turned into this stony road, walled on either hand, and full of ruts and hummocks, he fancied there crouched in the deep shadows of the farther end where the path fell sharply away, descending later on to the sea itself, the shapeless, motionless figure of some lightly sleeping beggar, or holy man.

"In either case annoying," he muttered, "when I've a mind to be undisturbed. Luckily I can take Jaina in with me. How many years ago was it my father told me of his stolen visits here—just such ones as this one of mine is to be—to make love to my Aunt Marie? Whom after all he

never married. Let us hope Allah does not intend to see the same comedy played again."

He gave his mare a careless pat on the arch of her satin neck and added, "Come, my lass, you had better tread light. But I daren't leave you outside—I might find you gone when I needed you most."

Before him now rose palely the rear wall of his aunt's grounds and with a quicker beating pulse he knew that beyond it slept, unconscious of his nearness, his ice maiden —Rapunzel.

The thought of Charlotte set him aflame as it always had the power of doing.

She drew him—if not as Pope suggested beauty to do by a single hair—at least by a single-minded determination. For he was come to that spot to move her, almost by force, if necessary, to a clear understanding of what life must mean to them both if they had to live it apart from each other.

"But I do hope she won't turn maidenish," he muttered grimly, "and scream the place down. Or there'll be the devil to pay. Let Gabrielle once get an inkling——"

Dismounting from his mare he thrust her bridle through his arm and leading her a dozen paces alongside the wall forced aside a mass of wild, flowering bush and set his key in a narrow door barely wide enough, as he pushed it back, to allow her to follow him gently through the opening into the silent garden.

As his father had done twenty-six years previously—and on just such another fragrant, moonlit night—he advanced slowly down a deserted path.

Under an ilex tree he left Jaina tied lightly to an overhanging branch.

Fatima still crouching warily behind her rosebush heard the grating of a key in the rusty lock of the long disused door and listened to the stealthy movements of the mare and Zeid with a curious expression of remorse on her dark features.

Then she rose to her feet noiselessly.

Sighing deeply she peered into the gloom of dense foliage near the wall.

"It is not the will of Allah, then, that I should help the little English girl. Yet Allah be thanked that he has come at last. It is safer for me if the plans of my mistress do not miscarry. I may yet mount that swift camel at dawn."

Then as Zeid's firm, light step came nearer down the path on which she was standing she ran a few steps along it to meet him.

"It is my lord Ahmed Kamedo, at last," she said in a low voice, and held out Gabrielle's letter to him. "Thy servant has waited long. But all is ready—the last instructions of my mistress are written on that paper. And the way now to her room is clear enough."

She stressed the pronoun significantly.

Sheer astonishment had kept Zeid speechless at first. Now he took the envelope from her hand and laughed. "I am certainly not the one for whom you wait, Fatima. What should Ahmed Kamedo be doing here? Have I not been seeking him this week past in the desert? Wherefore thrusts he his hand in my dish—uninvited?"

Fatima gave a terrified gasp and looked more closely into the stern face of Zeid.

"It is the son of my mistress," she whispered. "What brings my lord Zeid here—to the woman's part of this house?"

Zeid caught her by the arm and pushed her into the shadow of a group of trees.

"I certainly did not expect to meet you, Fatima," he returned. "What mischief has my lady mother been hatching? Now you shall give me an explanation, oh daughter of a mischief-loving race."

Unconsciously he held her arm more tightly and Fatima, lifting her head, met his eyes wistfully.

"My lord must not forget that I am but a handmaid," she replied slowly. "Also my mistress will certainly beat

me again if I do not keep faith with her. Yet since my lord's cousin delays his coming what do I care for a beating when it is a question of a life?"

More and more intrigued by such strange speech Zeid let her arm go and remained staring at her sombrely.

"Come," he said at last, "read me this riddle—you shall come to no harm, I can promise that. But first of all tell me which is the room up there that Miss Manisty sleeps in?"

Deliberately Fatima pointed to the two end windows on the second floor of that wing of the house.

Zeid nodded, "They used to be my nurseries," he said.

"The one with the balcony is her sitting-room," she went on, "the other——"

"And, I suppose, she's asleep in there."

Fatima shook her head.

"Not so—they are all at the ball of Monsieur de Brancas."

Zeid uttered an exclamation.

"What a fool!" he said impatiently. "Of course—it was to-night. But Allah knows I had completely forgotten the affair having other business on my mind. It may be hours yet before she comes back."

Fatima stared at him.

"You wait to see the little English girl, my lord Zeid?"

"Yes," he said and laughed at her shocked expression. "Come, you ought to know the game of the lover in this land well enough, Fatima."

"It too often leads to misery," she reminded him.

But Zeid was not listening to her.

"Come," he went on, "since it appears that Allah has decided to help me—and I must wait—I shall certainly have the more leisure to investigate the very doubtful intentions and schemes of my talented cousin, Ahmed Kamedo."

He led the unresisting Arab girl to that bench by the pool of water on which Charlotte had once sat with Claude

de Brancas, and making her sit there stood over her, "Now," he bade her, "unfold to me this tale. What has this letter in it that you were to give into the hand of Ahmed Kamedo?"

Fatima looked about her cautiously before she made any effort to answer Zeid.

She did not wish to run the risk of making a second mistake that night. Already an imprudent carelessness had led her to give Gabrielle's letter to quite the wrong man. Not that she regretted having done so. For Gabrielle she detested from the bottom of her heart, and anything that might awaken Zeid's anger towards her Fatima would always welcome. But suppose Ahmed Kamedo might be lurking somewhere near in those black shadows of which the garden was more than full and should overhear what she was going to say? That might, too easily, lead to bloodshed. She had no mind to see the pavement at her feet stained with the life blood of either Zeid or his truculent cousin. For then indeed, apart from the very sincere affection in which she held the son of her mistress, and the genuine grief any accident to him might cause her, her own days would be thereafter few and evil. Morocco, as Charlotte had reflected earlier that night, is not a law-abiding, peaceful, uplifted community.

"Well?" demanded Zeid. "Do not take too long to decide how you will tell me this tale."

But Fatima had her own way of going about it. And between the wealth of Oriental imagery she employed, and the roundabout method with which she made him acquainted with those facts she considered it essential he should know, it was some time before he clearly understood what on earth she was driving at.

Then he said, "You mean my mother left you here to see that Ahmed Kamedo abducted Miss Manisty? But that seems unthinkable."

"Nevertheless it is the truth."

A fierce anger almost rendered him speechless.

"And my lord's wife that shall be threw this letter to me from the balcony yonder. She knows all that the Princess Mohammed Ali intends."

"Gabrielle——"

Again his anger almost overwhelmed him. That she should dare to lend herself to so detestable and cruel a scheme appeared to him too monstrous. So rash and desperate a move, too, as it was. Did she imagine that Charlotte could be made to disappear thus and that there would be no hue and cry after her?

"Gabrielle goes to sea in a sieve," he muttered. Then added aloud, "Ahmed is late, it would seem, at the rendezvous."

Fatima nodded.

"He should have been here an hour ago. For I was to show him where to hide in the garden. And at the right moment he would climb in at her balcony——"

Said Zeid glacially, "He will not climb in at her balcony —if I have to kill him first. Where is this ladder of ropes of which you spoke?"

Fatima pointed to a flower bed under the window.

"It is all ready. There is a hook and a smaller rope on the balcony now. And I was to pull the ladder into position for him——"

"And where was he to take her?" asked Zeid.

Once more the Arab girl cast a guarded look about them. Then for a time she sat staring silently before her. Finally, as one who finds the task too difficult and abandons it, she made a gesture towards the envelope Zeid still held. "In there lies the answer to your question," she said.

Impetuously he tore the paper apart.

"Yes," he said after a moment, "it is as I expected. She was to be carried into the interior by him for ransom—and if not ransomed——"

He crushed the paper in his hand.

"Allah do so to me and more also," he cried passionately, "if I do not take her for myself now."

Then with a sudden change of mood he smoothed the crumpled piece of paper and bestowed it in his belt.

"Meanwhile, Fatima, let us thank Allah," he remarked to her surprise quite cheerfully, "that the orphan is not to be rendered outcast by the plotting of the wicked. Therefore let us get about our business, oh daughter of a chameleon mother, which is to save her from Ahmed Kamedo. That beggar in the lane out there may be one of his servants. Do you, Fatima, using guile, as is every woman's way, go out to him and bring him back to me—here."

But after she had slipped noiselessly away on her task he remained seated brooding sardonically upon the strange transformations the passion of love can effect in human character. So that Gabrielle, a girl whose nature had appeared to him as rather weakly clinging than in any way strong was prepared to go to the most savage lengths to help his mother in her appalling plot against the happiness—even life—of a girl who had never really harmed either of them.

That he was on the point of trying to persuade her to an elopement had nothing to do with it. For up to this moment Charlotte most certainly was quite unaware of his adventurous plans. But that these two women he thought he knew so well could be engaged in an unblenching conspiracy of such a kind, and one involving so fearful an existence for one of their own sex, fairly appalled him. The human heart was decidedly a strange, unknown quantity. But the whole situation was too doubtful—too dark. He must get Charlotte away as soon as possible. It did not bear thinking about. But that settled his obligations as to Gabrielle. Using such utterly indefensible methods as she was to gain her own ends—marriage with her was not to be endured. Again the abhorrent plan in its entirety rose before him and made his blood boil. At that moment he could have committed murder.

"My Aunt Marie's life may have been ruined by my mother's double-dealing," he reflected bitterly, "but now

they shall not do me in. Nor shall they get my little Rapunzel and break her on the wheel of life."

It was with a feeling of real security he remembered that Kirsty McLeod, that steady-eyed soul, was already at her work in his house in the hills beyond Marrakesch. He would take Charlotte to her—she would be faithful, he knew. Moreover he had a shrewd suspicion that in Kirsty his mother would at last meet with her Waterloo.

The furtive return of Fatima with a tall, gangling Moor wrapped in a brown, hooded jellab, but barefooted, although in his belt there were both knife and pistol, roused him from his abstraction.

Zeid stared searchingly at him while the newcomer made the sign of peace. Placing his open hand on his heart and then turning it slowly till the palm was towards him.

"The peace of Allah be with you," said Zeid, inclining his head gravely.

His salutation concluded, the tall Moor remained standing before him without speaking or moving.

"Who is it you await out there in the lane?" asked Zeid curtly.

"I am a servant of thy cousin," returned the Moor. "His orders were that I should sit in the lane——"

"For what purpose?"

"That I know not. Till he came—so ordered Ahmed."

"And he is late," returned Zeid, "and I grow tired of waiting for him."

"You?"

The man seemed surprised.

"Yes," replied Zeid firmly, "I wait for him."

The follower of Ahmed shrugged his shoulders.

"To the watcher patience—and yet more patience," he said after a pause.

But Zeid appeared to be losing rapidly that compliant quality.

"Allah—and also my cousin—knows I cannot remain here forever. Lo—the dawn within the next two hours," he

retorted sharply. "Where should my cousin be? Is he not wasting his time and mine?"

The authority of his manner had its effect on Ahmed's not too brainy retainer. The more so as he happened to be genuinely ignorant of that noisy brawler's business in this particular quarter of Tangiers. So definite an assertion that he was awaiting his master on the part of the young Sheik Zeid distinctly impressed Auda. In a world of liars it was quite possible that he was speaking the truth on this occasion. And that Ahmed was to have attended some secret consultation here in this garden towards the small hours of the morning. He knew by the position of the stars that it was long past two o'clock now. Rumors of a treaty of peace between the cousins had been circulated amongst their followers for some weeks. Whether these were ill or well founded he did not pretend to know. Auda not being one to meddle himself in the affairs of those above him. He had always, from a boy, preferred an existence of contemplation and repose to the receiving and imparting of news. So only did one avoid coming up against the strong arm of authority. Nor could one's words be idly quoted against one in the Soko of a Thursday morning where rumor grew fat, in the market place, on a steady diet of imaginative gossip.

Therefore he began to explain again to Zeid that his master had merely issued a general order that Auda was to spend the night hours in the lane at the back of the Villa of the Nightingales watching all who came and went. But for what reason he was completely ignorant as Allah knew. Nor had he the slightest idea what Ahmed had intended doing when he did arrive on the peaceful, empty, starlit scene. The Prince Zeid must not bear him ill will.

Taking it altogether Ahmed's man now made it clear to Zeid that he was inclined to consider he had been decidedly put upon, and that he was quite ready to impart to him what little he knew or guessed of his master's movements.

"Then where stays Ahmed?" asked Zeid.

Auda looked at him pensively.

"There is a certain dancer—one Zillah by name——"

Zeid uttered an exclamation of furious irritation, so completely and naturally simulated, that Fatima lurking unnoticed in the background dared to smile broadly.

"And he wastes precious hours at her house?"

Auda nodded.

"So will he not learn wisdom," declaimed Zeid sententiously. "Though he may find a kind of heaven in her arms."

"Do we not all know Zillah and her kind?" asked Auda contemptuously. "Such women make men of understanding to fall heavily by the wayside. It is better in the end to drink out of thine own cistern, oh Zeid, son of Mohammed Ali."

Zeid nodded. He was thinking how best to get Auda safely out of the garden and make him the bearer of some message to Ahmed which would keep his cousin well out of the way till it was too late for him to carry out the orders of the Princess Mohammed Ali.

"Whoso pursueth that road of knowledge will find no angels spread their arms to receive him on entering Paradise," he declaimed, "as promiseth Mohammed of Arabia to the scholar."

Slowly Auda smiled—this was a kind of talk he understood.

"Thy cousin is no scholar—he is a man with a proud look and hands that are apt at shedding blood."

Zeid, sitting on his bench, appeared to consider the assertion.

Then he said, "Let us take counsel together. Dost thou know where this Zillah lives?"

"Beyond the little Soko—there is a street——"

"Canst thou come by it?"

Auda thought he could. The house, once there, was not difficult to find. It possessed a curiously carved balcony

of fretwork and there was a green enamel in the shape of a moon let in the wood of the door.

"Then get you there," ordered Zeid, "and wait upon the doorstep till Ahmed shall come forth from the house. Then give him this——"

He took from his belt a pocket-book out of which he tore a blank leaf. Then with a pencil that was attached to it he wrote some lines in Arabic. That done he folded the sheet and handed it to Auda.

"Tell him that you saw me write what is therein," he said in his most magisterial manner, "and hear me, oh son of a desert mother, and obey. Sound wisdom is it to see and hear nothing at times. To know nothing also. Take counsel with thyself on these points—and go. Allah be with thee."

Dismissing Auda thus, on a sterner note of warning, he ordered Fatima to conduct Ahmed's servant out of the garden. But when she returned to ask Zeid what she was to do now she found, to her dismay, that that active and impetuous son of the Princess Mohammed Ali had completely vanished. No conjurer performing his most celebrated magic could have caused him to disappear more entirely.

For some time Fatima lingered beside the pool looking up at the balcony of Charlotte's room expectantly. But the windows remained dark and no sound floated out to her from within.

Then suddenly she saw the electric light go up.

A few moments later the sound of a strange, rough, masculine voice speaking harshly in that English tongue she did not comprehend frightened as well as perplexed her.

Fatima crept nearer and in the shadow of the balcony stood below listening with all her ears and wondering with all her might for a considerable period of time.

CHAPTER 12

UNDOUBTEDLY very luckily for everyone George had arrived on the festive scene some time after the announcement of Charlotte's engagement to Claude de Brancas had been made to an interested assemblage. The girl's unusual beauty, if nothing else, insured to her that applause at least with which they would have, equally spontaneously, endowed a visiting operatic star. The speeches, congratulations, and drinking of healths which followed Monsieur de Brancas' neat little oration George had also, again fortunately, missed. For, in that first heady rush of the fiercest resentment he had ever experienced, he would have been perfectly capable of denouncing the lying jade, Charlotte, in the most Biblical of terms to the whole assembled European colony of Tangiers.

However, as he acquired the lamentable news from a chance acquaintance just outside the ballroom, whither he was at once repairing to try and find his faithless charmer, whom at that precise moment he could perceive nowhere, George was forced to preserve a decent pretense of self-control. And allow his wrath to burn passionately within rather than without.

As he lounged in that corner near the famous double doors of carved teak wood, which led into Claude de Brancas' picture gallery, nursing his pain and rage in a sullen silence he reflected bitterly that Charlotte, in betraying him thus callously, had not only bereft him of his peace of mind—probably for ever, no matter whom he now married in the long run—but of his hitherto optimistic belief in the essential goodness of mankind as well. The whole world now appeared to him peopled by casual, sinister devils

—all waiting to prey on him, and destroy him and his ideals. Yet underneath all this censorious exasperation with a society that could treat him so badly there also mounted steadily a cold tide of hopeless misery. While reason told him emphatically that he had never been the man to keep Charlotte. Her bright and delicate loveliness had never been meant to grace any home that he could make. Suddenly, and oddly at such a moment, he found himself thinking with a spasm of affection of the plain and practical Hilda. It was too bad she was so many hundred miles away in this crisis in his affairs. She would so well have understood and ministered to his real need for comfort and sympathy. Yes, Hilda was a good, comfortable, straight sort of girl. George was immensely relieved to recollect that there was certainly no nonsense about her. Her yes was yes—and her no was equally negative. No hesitation or changing of her mind once Hilda had decided on a course of action.

Regarding the animated and kaleidoscopic scene—"a very merry, dancing, drinking, laughing, quaffing and unthinking time"—which so continually shifted, with an increasing distaste that was, under the circumstances, not surprising, George had almost decided to force Charlotte's hand; and, going in search of De Brancas, unfold to him her unscrupulous duplicity and demand to be confronted with her instantly, when he felt a light touch on his arm.

George swung about.

A very pretty, dark, and foreign looking little thing in a fluffy pink frock, and wearing the kind of pearl necklace he had always wanted to give Charlotte one day—when his ship came in—stood beside him.

She had, he remembered, meeting her eager, friendly glance sombrely, been pointed out to him more than once in the past two months as the future wife of that arrogant and far too handsome young puppy Zeid. Who, George had felt, was inclined to flirt with the peccant Charlotte far too eagerly.

With a flash of grim satisfaction he now speculated upon the possibility that this young Apollo might quite conceivably be as disturbed as he was on hearing that Charlotte was to ally herself with Monsieur de Brancas. Only in his position he dared not show any chagrin he might feel.

It was Gabrielle who had first caught sight of George standing there lankily disconsolate and brooding—a target of conjecture for every eye—looking, she thought, very like a water-spout about to explode over an unsuspecting country-side. Therefore immediately abandoning her dancing partner she threaded an unobtrusive, though swift, way through the crowd of fox trotters till she reached him.

That he should meet Charlotte now—however he had managed to get there and whatever he had heard—did not appeal to her at all.

That meeting, when it did come off, must make history. She was determined on that.

So she laid a gentle hand on his coat sleeve.

"You are Mr. Painter, are you not?" she asked.

George looked down at her curiously.

"Yes," he said.

"I am Gabrielle Davonier," she went on sweetly. "And what are you doing here, Mr. Painter? When you have quarrelled so dreadfully with Charlotte that she has returned you your ring."

In an astonishment so blank that Gabrielle almost expected to see that square jaw of his descend upon his chest with a dull thud George continued to stare at her unblinkingly.

Then he said slowly, "I'm sure I don't understand a word you are saying. I—quarrel with Charlotte?"

Still sweet as honey she looked up at him with great, innocent brown eyes.

"But Charlotte told me that you and she had had a terrific quarrel. Were you not at one time engaged to her?"

This opened the floodgates.

With a fiery eloquence that Gabrielle could not have

quenched, or stemmed, no matter how much she might have wished to mould, or even merely turn, the red hot current of his splenetic lamentations George Painter now bestowed on this attentive little girl, who so evidently had the story all wrong—more of Charlotte's double dealing he supposed grimly—an accurate, detailed history of his ill-starred engagement. While gently, but imperceptibly, she kept him moving by her side continually away from the main crowd until she finally managed to land him, with real dexterity, in a deserted kind of little ante-room, not too well lighted, some distance beyond the picture-gallery.

Here Gabrielle felt herself at last secure from interruption. For into this part of the house, so remote and silent, no guest was at all likely to stray.

In this asylum she therefore now sat down, emitting a small sigh of deep satisfaction as she did so, at the same time inviting George to dispose his long form on the sofa beside her. She had chosen this particular piece of furniture entirely for its excellent strategical position which commanded a view of both door and window.

For some little time longer, now she had him in safe anchorage, she encouraged George to rave on about Miss Manisty's heartless behavior. Merely making soft, sympathetic noises whenever she fancied he was going to pause for a remark from her. Which was not often.

But during this interlude she was busily considering how best to make her own first move in the dramatic game of consequences she purposed playing.

Finally she said sweetly, "I can't tell you how much I sympathize with you, Mr. Painter. But I think you are an angel to take it all so quietly."

George who had imagined that he had been impressing her considerably with his hectoring and blustering qualities stared at her.

"Quietly?" he repeated. "That is hardly the term to use, surely. I thought you understood by now all I feel about it."

"Oh, feel!" returned Gabrielle with a shrug of her shoulders. "But what are you going to do?"

Distinctly taken aback by this view of the case George stared unseeingly at the pattern of the carpet for some minutes.

"Do? What can I do?" he then demanded exasperatedly. "Except go to De Brancas and make it hot for Lotta. There is nothing to be done that I can see. And probably, as he's a Frenchman, he wouldn't believe a word I said," he ended gloomily, the cold fit now punctually following the hot fit.

Gabrielle looked very wise—almost owl-like in her gravity.

"I think he would," she said. "But has it not occurred to you that you are giving up the battle rather easily? Surely it would be better to go straight to Charlotte and have it out with her. That is what I should do if I were a man."

"Charlotte wouldn't listen to me," he said sulkily.

"Not here, perhaps—where you would be liable to interruption every minute."

"If I called her on the phone she'd ring off. I know Charlotte and how she behaves when she has handed you a dirty deal."

"But she'd have to listen if——"

Her hesitation was so marked that George's curiosity was, as she meant it to be, distinctly roused.

"If, what?"

"And I think you owe it to yourself——" Her tones were delicately judicial.

But this oblique way of planting ideas in his head did not appeal to George and made him impatient.

"I don't think I follow you," he said. "And I don't see how you can help me—though it's very good of you to have listened to all this boring flood of denunciations of mine——"

"I liked it," returned Gabrielle simply. "It was what one

would expect of a man treated as badly as you have been. Why should you not show some spirit? Is it necessary for you to allow Charlotte to trample on you as she does just because she is the prettiest girl in Tangiers? Also you seem to forget that I live in the same house with her. Oh, I could help you—yes."

She laid her fingers on his arm almost caressingly.

"Perhaps I am more of a friend to you than you know," she said earnestly. "And to Charlotte too, if the truth were known. She hardly knows what a foolish girl she is playing with the kind of fire she has been fanning into flame."

George did not reply to this.

"But," continued Gabrielle smoothly, "she ought to listen to what you have to say. And if you meant her to listen to you—I know a way in which you could make her."

She spoke so certainly that George felt a sudden flash of hope shimmer across his dark sky.

"How?" he asked briefly.

"Would you still be willing to marry her?"

"If she'd have me—I suppose so."

"Even after this?"

George nodded.

Yet chiefly he knew, in his heart, that he wished to tell Charlotte first just what he thought of her. Let her for once face the result of her unscrupulous actions. It was high time some one informed her where she descended from her chariot and walked like other ordinary mortals.

"Well—then I could tell you how to do it," promised Gabrielle.

"Please explain," said he.

Thus encouraged she entered into a well thought out and plausible explanation of just how George, if he fell in with her plans, could force Charlotte's hand.

"And if you went to her room—now—to-night——" she ended slowly.

"To-night?"

"Well, it's nearly morning, I admit. Past two o'clock already. But I mean now—and at my Cousin Marie's house. Why do you look so taken aback?"

"But—but——" spluttered George.

Gabrielle laughed.

"Oh, you hypocritical young man," she cried lightly. "Are you afraid to go and see Charlotte because the circumstances are unconventional? No one need ever know you've been there."

"But I don't see——"

"Listen—I'll tell you exactly how to do it. So that neither you nor she will get into trouble."

"It seems to me it would hardly be playing the game."

"Playing the game——" Gabrielle was openly scornful. "And yet you admit you were ready enough to make a horrible fracas here only an hour ago."

"That's different—I was simply furious then. Cut to the heart. Now I'm just miserable."

"I can't see the slightest difference in the situation. You've got over feeling it all—very quickly. Are all Englishmen as cold as that, and as easily put off? You couldn't have really cared much for her."

"I'm not cold," cried George, flustered by the sudden attack, "and Charlotte has of course behaved atrociously. But you're French and you don't understand us at all." After a second he added crossly, "Of course I still care for her."

"Then why not tell her so?"

"At this time of night?"

Gabrielle continued blandly, "Appeal to her better feelings—she must have them. What has the time of night to do with it? Besides, you see we do not really want her to marry Claude," she continued gently. "We all think it most unsuitable. Charlotte would never be happy with him. He is a real boulevardier—and much too old for her. Now if a clever man like you were to say all these

things to her before the affair goes too far—I am certain you could make her see the other side of the picture."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes. Tell me, why does she throw herself away on an old man like that? Why, there is a legend in our family that he actually proposed to my Cousin Marie once."

"He's rich," returned George succinctly.

Gabrielle shrugged her shoulders once more.

"But he can leave her nothing at his death. Should not some one warn her? In any case," continued his temptress, "once Claude learns how she has treated you he is morally certain to break off his engagement. We French respect betrothals. He would feel, as things stand now, that he had stolen her from you—unless you gave her up willingly. In such a case you would find him the soul of honor. Some one surely should inform her of this, too."

"Willing or not—I shall be the goat," remarked George bitterly.

"All the more reason, then, why you should come to an understanding without delay. This is no time for silly prudish scruples. After all, it was Charlotte herself who told the Princess Mohammed Ali——"

At once the recollection of the anonymous communication he had received flashed into his worried mind. Yes, it must have been the mountainous mother of Zeid who had taken the trouble to warn him. No matter what her motive she had been more than right in her estimate of Charlotte; and had, as well, tried to do him a real service. The little girl by his side was probably equally friendly to him. With these new, illuminating thoughts in his head, while Gabrielle cleverly dished every objection he could advance to her scheme—at last she won him to a half-hearted consent to take action at once.

As she put the thing it sounded romantic enough—which he did not care for—but hardly as compromising as he had on the first hearing considered it. Possibly Gabrielle was right in her estimate of Charlotte that she was a real

romantic at heart—and would fall for a piece of theatricality of the kind he was to embark on. Therefore yielding finally to that partly coercive, partly coaxing way of hers, before they left the room together, George stood committed to a blind obedience of which he certainly did not foresee the result, and Gabrielle had prevailed on him to carry on her own very doubtful game—although he was far from guessing this—a point further.

It was with immense satisfaction she saw him disappear down a back stairway to carry out her instructions.

She was sure, once started, he did not possess enough imagination to take fright till she had got him just where she wanted him.

Smiling to herself she reflected it would then be much too late to try and draw back.

Still smiling brightly she then went in search of Charlotte.

Her she found dancing a little wearily, after the emotions and excitements of that long night, with some negligible, strange young man from whose arms she snatched her determinedly.

Steering her into a quiet corner—for now the rooms were emptying fast, and people were going, yawning, home again—she said in an urgent whisper, "Charlotte, do you know George Painter is here and hunting for you?"

Receiving this piece of information Charlotte gasped and went as white as her dress. Gabrielle followed up her advantage briskly.

"He seems dreadfully upset," she said.

"Oh, what shall I do?" asked Charlotte. "I can't and won't speak to him here."

"Then come home at once," returned the French girl firmly. "Of course you don't want to see him. These young men don't care what they say and do when they're upset. I'll get Cousin Marie—you go and say good-night to Claude. And, whatever you do, don't let him see you're bothered about anything. We don't want to start anything at this late hour. He has the eyes of a lynx."

2.

Going home in the motor a trio of silent women occupied themselves with their own thoughts.

Marie de Dasulas was reflecting that after all Charlotte had looked lovely and behaved unexceptionably. And that Claude was happier than she had ever known him to be.

Stifling a yawn she hoped the marriage might yet turn out a success. At least they would make a wonderful looking couple. Quite as attractive as her dear Zeid and Gabrielle, whose sleepy head was at the moment nestled against her shoulder.

Behind closed eyelids Gabrielle was congratulating herself on having already passed one barrier safely. For the features of the footman who had stood by the open door of their motor as they hurried into it had, in the dim, uncertain light, passed unremarked by either her cousin Marie or the brooding Charlotte. And he now sat stiffly by the chauffeur in the front seat dressed in Louis' livery which would insure him a safe entry to the Villa of the Nightingales no matter how late the hour. Furthermore there was, in the capable hands of Claude de Brancas' major-domo, a note which he was to give his master as soon as one half hour had elapsed from the time of Gabrielle's leaving the house.

Of Charlotte's meditations the least said the better.

3.

A prey to the most poignant distress and anxiety she removed herself as soon as she dared from the society of Gabrielle and Madame de Dasulas who as usual, on returning from a dance, wandered into the dining-room to sip their orange drinks, and eat a sandwich, while they swapped experiences of the last few hours before going to bed. Generally she was as ready as they to linger and to be as

witty as they were in their descriptions of the evening's events. But now, feeling as she did almost insane with turbulent and fearful imaginings, Charlotte wished to retire to the quiet of her own room as soon as possible. There she might be able to think things out.

She hardly listened to Marie de Dasulas' predictions about all that would happen in the next few weeks. Claude de Brancas having already told them both that he insisted on a speedy wedding.

It was all Charlotte could do to answer coherently, let alone preserve a decent appearance of happiness.

All the time Gabrielle sat on the arm of a chair watching her with that cat-like look of hers which Charlotte so distrusted.

Finally she managed to get away and fled to her own room.

4.

A disturbing, uncanny feeling that she was not alone suddenly struck her as she stood before the looking-glass on her dressing table removing that circlet of brilliants from her head which was now her own property. She had been there staring absently at herself for fully five minutes trying to make up her mind what she should say to George —who was the first lion in her path—when some tiny noise in the next room startled her and set her to listening apprehensively. With the sparkling thing in her hand she swung around to look about her. But in her bedroom at least nothing stirred. And the whole aspect of the room was as usual. Her bed was turned down and on it lay her pajamas and blue silk kimono. Having already taken off her frock she ran across the room to pick the kimono up and wrap it about her. Then a second slight sound from the sitting-room made her run to the door between the rooms and fling it open.

In the far corner, by the door into the passage, stood a

man in livery, who had apparently turned on the electric light again as he came in.

"Louis," she exclaimed, "what on earth are you doing here?"

Then she saw it was not Louis.

"My God," she said furiously, "it's George!"

Regarding her grimly he came towards her.

Charlotte looked him up and down. Now that she knew it was only George her first feeling of alarm had completely subsided. She could always manage George.

"How on earth did you get in here?" she asked. Then with a sudden gurgle of laughter at the sight of him in a livery so much too big for him—for Louis was inclined to stoutness and George though lanky was certainly thin—she added, "What made you make such a fright of yourself?"

"That's no business of yours," he growled.

Already Charlotte had taken the initiative in an encounter in which from the first he had designed to crush her.

"Yes it is," she retorted with spirit.

"Well, now that I am here——" he began.

"And aren't you ashamed of yourself—skulking in upon me at this time of night—or morning—and all dressed up like Punch——"

He took a step or two towards her.

"I wish you'd stop staring at me with that amused expression on your face. There's nothing to laugh about in the present situation that I can see," returned George severely. "Haven't you ever seen a man in a chauffeur's rig-out before?"

Again she giggled.

"Yes—but not you, George. And really it doesn't suit you. It just fits where it touches. Let me give you a piece of advice—don't go in for chauffing if you ever abandon journalism."

In spite of the lateness of the hour and the general gravity of the occasion Charlotte, he realized, was cer-

tainly not going to take matters as seriously as he had intended her to. Once more he repeated angrily, "I see nothing to laugh at."

Charlotte went over to the writing table and lit a cigarette.

"Nor do I, as a matter of fact," she returned in graver tones than she had used up to then. "Do you want a cigarette?"

"No."

"Oh, well, don't snap my head off."

And with a quick look at him she went past him, smoking carelessly, and sat herself down in an easy chair.

Again, this very simple action on her part disconcerted him considerably. She seemed to mind so little either the position she was in or the fact that he had come to confront her with the enormity of her conduct.

"And I must say I'm astonished at the tone you're taking," he said.

"What did you expect me to do? Scream the place down? That wouldn't have done any good—use your brains, George. That would have only brought a whole lot of curious people here to listen to your row. For, I suppose, now you've got in—and quite cleverly, I admit—you mean to say a few kind words before you leave me sobbing my heart out crouched pitifully in a chair."

George glared at the flippant sinner.

"Damn you, Charlotte," he said slowly at last.

"All right," said she airily.

By this time and under this caustic treatment he was beginning to simmer once more. And allowing his rage to get the better of him again he strode threateningly towards the chair in which she lounged so insolently.

"I will not be put off," he thundered.

"Don't shout," said she.

"And I won't be put in the wrong."

"Again, all right," she returned.

"And for once in your life you're going to hear a bit of the truth," he declaimed.

"Probably too much of it," she retorted.

"Yes, the absolute truth—for once."

"That will be nice," jeered Charlotte, still showing far too composed a front.

Irefully George came and stood over the exasperating creature who was looking lovely enough to stir any man's pulse and equally maddeningly indifferent.

Charlotte returned his black looks indolently, blew a cloud of smoke into the air, and remarked sweetly, "Don't touch me, George. I bruise, like the pears at home in the window of a fruit shop, so quickly."

George controlled himself with difficulty.

"Charlotte!"

She raised a lazily protesting hand. "Present—and I'm not deaf."

Drawing a tremendous breath that actually whistled through his clenched teeth George now offered up an audible prayer that he might not yet murder the girl before he had finished with her, and then embarked on that electrifying speech composed of censure and invective finely mingled to which he had been adding for the last two weary hours.

Charlotte heard his well turned oratorical periods in a demure silence. Once only she interrupted the flow to remark clearly, "I know just as well as you do, George, how badly I've behaved."

Unfortunately, instead of mollifying him in any way, this admission only set him off again with renewed vigor. However, feeling very strongly that she owed it to him to accept his fulminations with outward submission at least, Charlotte bore the sermon nobly till he said, "You're the kind of girl of which the woods are full that has to be caught red-handed before you listen to any one. You're the sort that believes it can get away with murder. You

think you can play fast and loose with every man you meet."

Energetically Charlotte contradicted him.

"Does it look as if I could?" she ended by demanding.

"But if so far," he went on wrathfully, "you have been lucky enough to meet with decent fellows who try hard to remember you're supposed to be a lady and not a cocotte, and who have no wish to take advantage of you——"

It was at this point that Charlotte allowed her glance to wander with meaning to the face of the clock, the hands of which now pointed clearly to three fifteen. In the garden the silently approaching dawn was becoming visible. Heavily she therefore, and pointedly, sighed.

"Oh, George," she reproved him, "and you here alone with me—at this hour! Suppose Madame de Dasulas ever got to hear of this visit of yours, where should I be? Really, you'd much better go, while the going's good. No one ever knows on these occasions what a minute may bring forth. Someone might be awake and snooping round. I know exactly what you think of me now. And it's all—true. That's the worst of it. I did use you—I can't deny it. I was going to write and explain it all—but now——"

Roughly he broke in, "Nobody will get to hear of my coming here, Charlotte. That's why I bribed Louis to lend me his coat and cap. If I am seen leaving—they'll think it's Louis up early on some errand."

"I'm sure I hope so."

"Besides everyone is dead asleep. No, you can't put me off so easily. I mean to have it out with you. Before I leave this place I intend to know where we stand."

Charlotte got up from her chair. For the first time in the interview she showed distinct traces of impatience.

"George," she said, facing him, "I want you to quite understand one thing—I know I've treated you rottenly. I don't excuse my behavior at all and really I'm horribly

sorry. But you have no idea how I was driven to do what I did. However—there it is. I'm a devil and heartless, and designing and predatory. Anything you like to cali me——"

"What good does calling yourself names do me?"

"No good, I'm sure. But it might be a satisfaction——"

"I don't want any explanations," he told her grimly. "I want you to make amends."

Charlotte looked genuinely puzzled. "In what way?"

"Give up that French chap. He'll probably give you up when he gets to hear about all this."

"Who'll tell him?"

George became evasive.

"I dare say plenty of people have an idea of what you've been trying to pull off by now. You're only marrying him for his money. That's what disgusts me so, Lotta. I never imagined you were just a vulgar, mercenary, little adventuress."

Now she met his hostile glance as furiously.

"Well, well, well," she said, "so that's to be your story, is it? You mind your own business, George, and I'll mind mine. Why I'm marrying him is our own affair—his and mine. We understand each other, thank you. Do you think he is foolish enough to imagine I've had no boys after me before him?"

"You won't get a red cent when he dies."

"Who told you that? Well, what do I care? I'm not so mercenary as you think. Claude's not going to die for a long time. And really I'm quite fond of him."

Casting a final frigid look at the insignificant worm she turned deliberately away as though to leave him.

"Good-night, George," she said sharply. "You get out of here. And shut the door softly when you go. You have compromised me, and bored me, which is much worse, quite enough."

Believing that she had every intention of giving him the slip, as was her custom when she had had enough

either of his conversation or his company, and of locking herself in her bedroom, whither he really dared not penetrate, George shouldered by her quickly. Then squarely blocking her path he cried, "For once you're not going to get away with it so easily, my good girl."

Then, before she guessed what his next action would be, he had her in his arms and was kissing her ardently.

"Who would have thought it of George?" flashed through Charlotte's mind as she tried to free herself. Not because she was yet alarmed but because George's kisses had always been distasteful to her. Having on her exactly the same effect as cheap sweets, she reflected.

"You'll have to marry me now, Lotta. I'm simply mad about you. You're mine—mine—and nobody shall take you from me."

"Oh, nonsense," muttered Charlotte.

But having by now completely lost his head he was repeating the latter half of his speech ecstatically, and at the top of his voice, when they both became fearfully aware that the door into the corridor was no longer closed.

Charlotte and George jumped apart and swung around hastily.

"Now, see what you've done?" said she to him in a tone of bitter resentment.

5.

In the doorway stood a thoroughly outraged, majestic Madame de Dasulas in a magnificent silk dressing gown, a lace cap on her head.

And behind her stood a sternly appearing Claude de Brancas.

Charlotte made a gesture of despair, and waited for the storm to break. Now, she realized, she was up to her neck in it.

"*Mais, mon Dieu!*" exclaimed Marie de Dasulas in a voice of frozen horror. "Does one receive the visits of

young men at this hour? I would never have believed such a thing of you, Mademoiselle Manisty. Who always had the appearance of a well brought up young person. You will consider yourself on the spot dismissed. To find you at three in the morning in the arms of a servant—that is a great deal too much."

She turned to the man at her elbow.

"What can I say, Claude? The situation is indeed beyond us all. The person who sent you that warning was only too right. I must apologize for at first refusing to believe it."

"This place rains anonymous letters," muttered George. Then he stepped forward.

"I am not your footman, Madame," he said. "My name is Painter—and I'm an old friend of Miss Manisty's family."

Madame de Dasulas shrugged openly sceptical shoulders.

"It is at least a little better that you are not Louis," she admitted coldly. "But one would say, however ancient the friendship between your families—and to me you look very young, Monsieur—this is hardly the accepted moment in which to call on that young woman. For whom I have nothing but blame."

"Don't be too hard on Lotta. I know the whole thing is wrong," George declared. "But the fact is I—I—I was mad with jealousy——"

"Jealousy of what—of whom?"

"I—I thought that I was engaged to—to——" George could not finish his stuttering sentence. He made a gesture towards Charlotte who was standing, statue like, facing them all.

"You thought you were engaged to Mademoiselle Manisty?" asked Claude de Brancas keenly, and passing Marie de Dasulas he came between George and Charlotte. "One commences to understand the affair a little better," he went on. "Were you engaged to Mr. Painter?" he demanded directly of her.

Charlotte nodded.

"I did try to tell you—on the terrace. Oh, a thousand years ago," she replied in a low tone.

Claude de Brancas regarded her as one might study a specimen under the microscope for an uncomfortable moment. Though Charlotte met his glance steadily enough, she could feel the shock of his anger like an electric current through her whole being.

"Mademoiselle," he began finally, "I think that you have a little mistaken the position——"

He turned again to Madame de Dasulas who had by this time seated herself wearily in the chair by Charlotte's writing table. She had the air of one to whom the whole thing had been too much of a sudden blow.

"Will you permit that I take up your time a little, Marie, to make clear my point of view?" he asked her gently.

"And mine—as well," she answered him mournfully. For she had been very fond of Charlotte.

Once more he turned to the girl he had designed to make his wife.

"When I had the honor to ask you to marry me," he said steadily, "I had not the slightest idea that you were already betrothed."

He bowed slightly to George.

"I beg you to believe, Monsieur, that I was entirely ignorant of that fact."

George waved a nervous hand. "I know that," he returned shortly.

"Some boy and girl flirtation I had credited you with, Mademoiselle, and was ready to forget it. You were young —it was not my business. But to find you——" He paused for a tense moment. "Yes, to find you a common cheat in affairs so delicate as those of marriage, to find you so without a sense of honor, of ordinary decency in these affairs, so bankrupt of right feeling—that alters my opinion of you entirely."

George could not help making an impulsive movement towards the older man which contrasted oddly with his chauffeur's livery. But Claude de Brancas held up his hand.

"No," he continued, "it would be useless for you to speak. Your words would not weigh with me, Monsieur. I have been blinded by a pretty face as we are so often, hélas. When the soul that should inform the body is worthless."

For the first time Charlotte spoke. "Oh, please——" she said in a choking tone. Then found for that time she could say nothing more. Because for the first time in her life she was seeing her actions from an outside point of view. And the effect on her was shattering.

"You, I see clearly, Mademoiselle," continued De Brancas, "are one of these modern young women, self-sufficient and lawless, about whom one reads so much in the literature of the day. I hardly believed in their existence. Fancying that they must be the creation of imaginative authors. Free lances of life, shall we call them? But now I see that such young women do really exist."

Again Charlotte tried to speak but found she could not put her whirling thoughts into words.

Claude de Brancas went on.

"To you, evidently, a life of excitement, of amourettes, of leading on one man after another, is all you care about. To you, men are to be played with, used, and swept aside when you have become finally bored enough. That is all your ambition. That you are a woman and have duties—you hardly believe. It is better to play bridge well."

He laughed harshly.

"What a fool you have made of us, little Charlotte Manisty. To you it is of no consequence that you should cheapen your womanhood in these episodes. For you are beautiful and the world is yours—still. What does it matter to you that you cannot remain young forever? That is something to be considered far in the future."

He smiled sardonically, stroking his beard with lean, sensitive fingers as Charlotte had seen him do so many times before.

"But remember this—no woman, however beautiful, can remain young indefinitely. All about us we can see the grandmother hoping that we are fools enough to believe she is as attractive as the débutante. And to what end? We men laugh and go to younger women. You make it so easy for us today. You who have no pride in your womanhood any longer. Who are so full of theories."

George muttered again that De Brancas should not be too hard on Charlotte. It was not so much her fault as the result of the confused thinking which had followed the European War. That had left nobody the same. People of today were suffering still for the follies of their parents.

Like lightning the Frenchman turned on him.

"No, Monsieur l'Anglais, it was not the war," he retorted sternly. "Give that legend a rest. This child is nineteen. Today we are nine years away from its close. But she, like all your younger people, is hiding herself behind an unspeakably unjust myth—an unworthy tradition. Because her elder brothers and cousins fought, and their fathers, she is to pretend that she has no duties, no responsibilities? Ridiculous! Where is the logic in that? All these young people of today are to run wild because the generation before them lies thick on the ground of Flanders. No, a thousand times, no. Shall I tell you what we think of such excuses?"

"No, no," said Charlotte.

"We think—many of us—that you are very cowardly to allow the memory of your great dead to be thus besmirched. Though it is not a pretty name, we are apt to call you—*sales bêtes*. You look to us like bubbles upon putrescence. Again, you must pardon such plain speaking on my part. But—let the war alone. For in reality it has given many of you younger men and women the chance

you would never have had if the dead men out there in Flanders were living today. Great poets, statesmen with vision, painters, scientific men lack us. Because of four years of hell. Again you talk very glibly of that four years knowing nothing of it but hearsay. And you make patronizing judgment. While for you, did you but know it, this is the opportunity of a hundred years. To carry on—to make a great nation—to live up to those ideals you merely speak of rhetorically——"

His manner, for all his incisive eloquence, was so icily condemnatory that George, to whom such a point of view before had been utterly alien, being as he was of his day and generation, fairly wilted before the blast. From his school days he had held the more general view that he and his compeers were more to be pitied than blamed for any vagaries in morals or standards they might practice. Life before the war had been dull and futile he had always heard from press and public. That there might conceivably exist thinking men and women who did not hold these belittling views of a period in which they had, after all, lived and worked he had never formed the least notion. Everything that antedated the European struggle during which he grew up—for he had been in his fifteenth year when the first shot of all was fired at Sarajevo—had been for him and his chosen companions, from his university days on, merely an endless subject for mirth and clever ridicule. To be Victorian was to be impossible—to be Edwardian was to be chronically in the wrong. The word *old-fashioned* set them all at once off on brilliantly mirthful tirades. Plain living and high thinking was merely a contradiction in terms—an absurdity. The temperament of the thinker, as well as the artist, required sympathetic understanding—the gentlest of hands.

But now—he began to wonder a little.

Possibly the generation before him had not been merely hypocritical and bullheaded. A decent reticence about life

and its emotional crises might not wholly connote sham and pretense. Perhaps the duller, more solid, virtues of the last century might have had some merit. Who knew?

Charlotte's eyes were by this time filled with tears, though she continued to face her judges with a stoic self-possession which even De Brancas, wounded as he was over the discovery of her light conduct, found wholly admirable.

"And permit me to remind you of something else, Mademoiselle," he pursued gravely. "This will be, perhaps, the only occasion in your life when someone will dare to speak candidly to you. But no nation was ever greater than its women. Read history intelligently, and you will find that fact out for yourself."

He regarded her darkly, doubtfully, then added, as if the words were forced from him, "You are not fit to bear a son, to bring up a daughter. What would you teach them to be? You, with your little brain so full of frivolity, your cheap cigarettes you smoke endlessly—in your bath, at your meals, at your work, at your play—your scent, your paint, the flashy tricks of a *petite dame*——"

Two tears fell, bright and shining, from Charlotte's eyes to the floor. And, perceiving them, De Brancas almost softened. But he had been too hard hit by her conduct, and, after a momentary pause, he continued, "Today it is the cocotte who dresses and behaves like a lady, and the lady who apes the cocotte. Today the daughter of Eve and the daughter of Lilith have almost changed places. Absurd, is it not? And when your men begin to treat you roughly, as you have taught them to, deriding—again as you have taught them—the plainer, patient virtues of women long dead whose garments' hem you are not worthy to touch, then go, laugh at us who still dare to voice truths on which the world must always rest; and clap your pretty, mischievous, idle hands, and applaud your own efforts to ruin the country that is unhappily yours."

George burst out, "Oh, I say, you're devilish hard on us, sir."

Yet, as he voiced the remonstrance, he was not so sure either. For had he not felt much the same thing himself in his first flush of anger that same night? Moreover he was perfectly acquainted with the record of the man standing there denouncing so icily the tendencies of the age. George knew what valor he had shown, like all his race, in defending his own land. Knew, too, how his own estates had been over-run and despoiled by the invader. Was perfectly aware what De Brancas' work had amounted to since the close of hostilities in rehabilitating ruined villages and setting up his tenants again in their desolated homes. Past question the man had shown himself a good citizen.

When he began to listen again he found De Brancas was saying, "Yet recollect this—it is a rule without exception—the light woman is of no account in nature. She is merely a bad debt to be written off as soon as possible. And when her non-moral ideas become, shall we say, fashionable, then Nature takes some other more virile, more honest living race for her great purposes. She sweeps over—she engulfs —these shirking, pleasure loving creatures. With their generation they die out—they cease to exist."

He stopped this peroration of his abruptly, stared at Charlotte with a curiously regretful expression on his face for at least three or four slow moving moments, then ended crisply, "I have the honor, Mademoiselle, to withdraw my offer for your hand."

Making her a bow, military in its stiff precision, he turned on his heel and left the room.

They heard his firm tread die away down the passage.

Madame de Dasulas got up from the chair in which she had been sitting. "I have nothing to add," she said.

"But won't you listen to what I may have to say?" asked Charlotte. "There may be another side to the story, you know."

"Nothing that would make any difference," returned Madame de Dasulas firmly. "For you have done things which would prevent our ever looking at you with the same

eyes again. We trusted you—we thought you one of ourselves. For me, I treated you as I would have treated a daughter of my own. But all this did not weigh with you, Charlotte. No, you will find that one cannot put the clock back—one must suffer the consequences of one's actions."

She sighed, took a step or two towards the door and added, "So, to-morrow you will leave for Paris in the charge of my courier, Le Normand. He will pay you your salary, get your tickets, and see to all expenses on the journey. From my house in Paris you will be sent quite safely back to England. I find you too much of a responsibility, my dear. In the future I should advise more honesty and less self-seeking in your dealings with your next employer."

Imperiously beckoning to the demoralized George, whose usual sang-froid had all but completely deserted him, she continued, "Mr. Painter, will you have the courtesy to lend me your arm to the hall—where I shall have the pleasure of wishing you a good morning. It is, as you see, already four o'clock and growing quite light."

Really afraid that he might yet do more harm—if that were possible—to Charlotte and her prospects than he already seemed to have accomplished, and cursing his folly in having allowed himself to be so blindly led into such a mess up of everything by Gabrielle Davonier's ridiculous plan—which he now perceived clearly had at no time been workable and into which he certainly should have looked at the outset more carefully, George would always blame himself for this—the unhappy fellow, with but one despairing backward glance at a white-faced Charlotte, suffered himself to be removed from her presence, and her life, forever.

6.

Her room when they had all departed from it seemed in the early dawn so unearthly and quiet a retreat that Charlotte could almost have persuaded herself into believing that

the just concluded scene had been an insubstantial dream, a nightmare, a figment of her brain.

Only that glancing at a chair near the door she saw Louis' cap lying on it—forgotten.

Again she might almost have instantly recovered her poise and her tranquillity, standing in the window looking out over the green garden and the golden sky, had it not been for a frightful mental weariness of which she was at last conscious. Added to the certainty that when her family should come to hear of her scandalous behavior, as come they must, she would be a flaring disgrace in the eyes of her own little world in England. Let her bowdlerize the tale as much as she would for home consumption.

For George she found, on reviewing the incidents of the past hour, that she had nothing now but a deep contempt.

Having got her into this bed of nettles he had pitiably failed to get her out of it.

But when her thoughts wandered to kindly, easy-going Marie de Dasulas—that was another matter.

Charlotte wished, choking back a sob that would creep up into her throat, that she had had sense enough to confess to her the truth before events, crowding one on another, had rendered it impossible.

"Well, everyone talked but me," she thought. "It's too bad that the dear old thing's memory of me must be clouded by all this rascality they seem to credit me with. I wonder if I'm really as bad as Claude made me out. Of course I can see how mad he must have been with me. A man with such a sense of duty could only think that way, I suppose."

Sighing deeply, for she felt too stunned to shed tears, she moved at last towards her bedroom, staring before her in a kind of trance of miserable foreboding as to the future when the door slid open before her astounded eyes and Zeid stood carelessly, laughing at her, upon its threshold.

"Lord have mercy upon me!" murmured Charlotte. "What a night! Isn't it over yet? How did you get here?"

"By the balcony of your sitting room some time ago. Since then I've been waiting a fitting opportunity to parley with you. Allah preserve me, what a mess you've got yourself into, Rapunzel!"

Feeling, with this new shock, and the heat and clash of the battle just ended, strangely weak, Charlotte now sat down on the nearest chair.

"I suppose I can't get in worse than I have already," she remarked with despairing calm, "and it would not be the slightest good my asking you to be so kind as to leave me——"

"Not the slightest."

"But—you didn't hear it all?"

He nodded easily, leaning against the doorpost.

"Every word."

"My luck has been dead out, hasn't it?"

"And I'm not sure that I don't rather sympathize with De Brancas," continued Zeid. "Really, Miss Manisty, you have been behaving atrociously. Engaged to two men at once? Fie!"

"I knew a girl who was engaged to eight on her wedding day. And married a ninth," retorted Charlotte.

"She must have had more luck—or managed things better—than you."

"Have you come here to lecture me, too?"

"No," he returned promptly. "And no man endowed with the slightest feeling could."

Charlotte sighed with relief.

"I know, as I've mentioned more than once during this dreadful night, that I've behaved very badly," she admitted miserably. "But it's all been made to look so much worse than it's actually been. And I do not understand French people—I admit that. And then, that fool, George. I wonder what put that bright idea in his ivory skull of coming to call on me here all dressed up."

Zeid came and sat on the arm of her chair.

"Gabrielle," he said instantly.

"I shouldn't wonder," returned Charlotte. "Well, she's done me in this time—good and plenty."

"That depends on how you look at it. But I might as well warn you now, once and for all, that if there is heavy weather in the Channel, and the shipping suffers, either my fat progenitor, or my slim cousin, have been blowing up a good-sized cap full of wind. So be on your guard."

Charlotte stared at him morosely.

"The advice comes a little late, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," said he.

"Either I'm going deaf, or trouble has robbed me of my power of understanding," she went on. "Would you please repeat that last sentence of yours again?"

"Not at all," said Zeid.

"What do you mean?"

He took one of her hands in his and, raising it to his lips, kissed it.

"I, too, have been at the crossroads in the last few hours. If De Brancas has changed his matrimonial plans—so have I."

Charlotte was horrified.

"Now?" she cried. "With all your invitations out—your cake made—Gabrielle's two wedding dresses in the house——"

"I can't help that."

"But it will upset your Cousin Marie so terribly. Should you give her such a shock?"

"She'll get over it," he returned. "Don't remove the exhibit—you have very pretty hands. And I like to look at the left one particularly."

"How absurd you are."

"Not more than most people, you'll find."

Charlotte shook her head.

"I'm afraid I shan't have very much time. If you listened carefully to your cousin's parting speech—you will

remember that, amongst other things, she mentioned I was setting out for Paris at break of day. I should, by rights, be packing now."

"I heard her," he rejoined. "But you're not going to Paris."

"Who will prevent me?"

"I will."

"You!" Charlotte laughed.

"Yes—hasn't it dawned on your poor, worthless, foolish, modern woman's gray matter yet that everything is turning out very well, and you're going to marry me? As Allah always intended us to."

"Oh, you're being foolish," said Charlotte. "You know as well as I do it's impossible. You don't mean it."

"I do. So you'd better get on a dress and a scarf, or something. For we must do our elopement act in the next ten minutes. My mare has been waiting long enough out there. She's a most sensible creature. And if she doesn't hear from me pretty soon now, she'll want to know the reason why. So she'll start whinnying, and then the fat will blaze up again. And I shouldn't care to have to shoot my way out."

"Nor I," said Charlotte.

"But I mean to marry you, Rapunzel, and that before very long."

Charlotte looked quite frightened and said, "I can't believe that you can possibly want to marry me after all you've heard."

"Strange but authentic," returned Zeid.

"Well, this is a completely new vista for me."

"These criticisms mean nothing to me," he continued grandly. "One man's meat is another man's poison—and so on."

"Even you think I'll be indigestible, then?"

He stole a look at her indignant expression.

"*Calme toi*," he said. "You happen to be the woman I adore. Will that satisfy you? And, out of date as it may

sound, you will probably fascinate me till I die. I have always known my own mind from a child."

Charlotte began to laugh helplessly. While Zeid continued forcefully, "If you'd stolen the contents of a bank, or committed a murder, I might regret such odd actions on your part—but it wouldn't make any difference. I should stick to you just the same. Out here we are not exactly a nation of Sunday school teachers, you know."

Charlotte made a wide gesture of comic despair.

"I give it all up," she said.

"Splendid!" And taking her at once in his arms he kissed her with determined and business-like fervor. Then he laughed at her, "Come, don't look so enchantingly bewildered, Rapunzel," he cried. "This is but the beginning of it all. For you and I are going to Asrah Jabal——"

"Where your mother is?"

"Yes—but she won't harm you once you're my wife. Before long I can see her getting very proud of you, and becoming perfectly devoted to you. You'll be the most important part of the family, you see. But I shall certainly have a thing or two to say to her. Besides you won't be without reinforcements. Kirsty is there already."

"Kirsty?"

Zeid laughed again and stroked her hair.

"Give me credit for thinking things out a little bit. What wide, surprised eyes! Yes, I warn you you're coming to people who sooner or later get what they want. Not always by civilized means, perhaps. Yes, Kirsty is doing a lot of good work there already. I always meant her to be the head of my little hospital. And though at first my people were distrustful, now the women, at least, wouldn't do without her for the world."

Charlotte made an effort to release herself from his arms.

"I suppose I'd better go and put on a frock," she said, "if we are to go——"

He nodded.

"Yes, we're going—I'm adamant on that point."

Again he caught her to him and kissed her.

"And so we'll try a desert life for a time, beloved of my heart. Rapunzel, Rapunzel, I believe I adored you from that first moment I saw your shining head of hair drying out of that very unromantic bath room window in your mother's house."

7.

The Muedhin's call from the mosque on the outskirts of the city of Tangiers sounded through the aromatic breeze laden air of the dawn.

"God alone is great—there are no gods but God. And Mohammed is his prophet. Come to prayer, come to security. God alone is great. There is no god, but God."

Far across the desert, in his arms and wrapped in his burnous, Charlotte heard Zeid say softly, "God has been very good to us, Rapunzel, singing bird of my heart."

His horse's galloping hoof beats almost drowned her murmured, "I love you, Zeid."

Baronet
Books